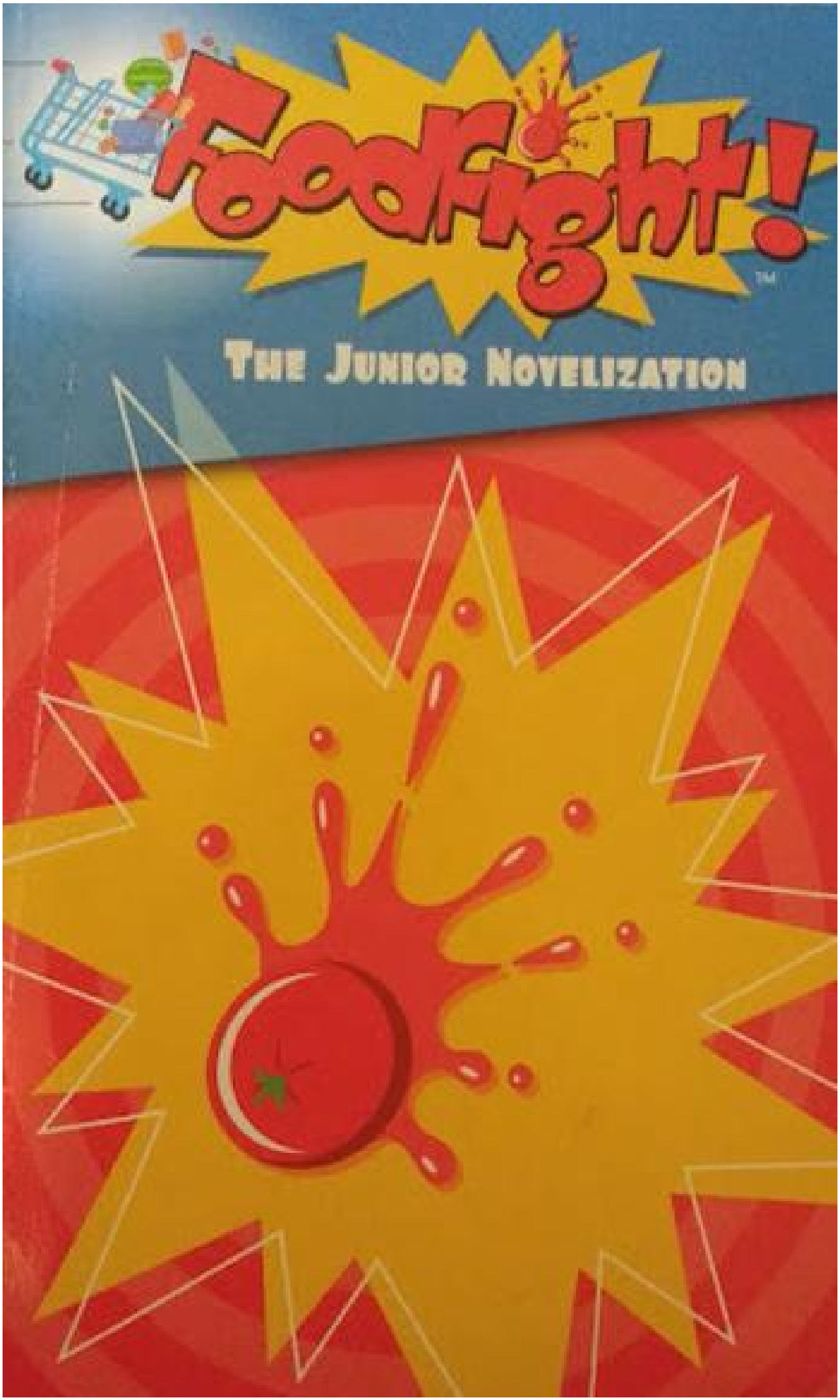
FoodFight!
THE JUNIOR NOVELIZATION

The Junior Novelization

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A Golden Book • New York

Mr. Leonard was a good supermarket manager. He kept his shelves clean and stocked with the finest goods money could buy.

The cash register closed with a satisfying clunk, and Mr. Leonard cheerfully waved good-bye to the last of his happy customers. It had been another successful day.

"Good night, Mr. Leonard," a customer called as she shuffled out the door with her bags. "Don't work too late, now!"

"Just closing up," Mr. Leonard answered, taking his keys with him as he prepared to lock up. "Nothing much happens around here after dark."

As the overhead lights flickered off one by one and the doors of the market clicked shut, the displays of soups and cookies and the aisles of

liquid cleanser and dog food stood still and quiet.

The lights began to flicker as the shelves of cardboard boxes and jars became buildings of mortar, steel, and glass. The brand icons of each product began to spring to life, ready for a night on the town!

Then the glass jars in the condiment section began to tinkle as an escaped helium balloon drifted silently across the store. A large bird in glasses stepped out of his home. *We're in a pickle now!* he thought as a gasp rose from the market aisles.

Riding the balloon was the Fat Cat litter brand icon, who was, as usual, up to no good. This time, he had kidnapped a basket of kittens for some unknown evil purpose.

Suddenly, the square-jawed face of Cinnamon Sleuth Cereal rose from his shelf. It was Dex Dogtective, the handsome icon who had made the words "The secret's inside!" world famous.

In his worn leather jacket and hat, Dex jumped onto the rising balloon that the Fat Cat icon had taken from the floral and produce section. He looked down and saw the passive aisles and displays slowly transforming into a living city—Marketropolis. It

was the kind of town that really came alive at night, and he knew every neon-lit street, back alley, and clearance shelf in the joint.

"Listen up, Fat Cat!" Dex said. The other "Ikes"—the brand icons who were the citizens of Marketropolis—looked on nervously. Dex nodded toward the fluffy kittens in the basket. "I'm giving you one last chance. Hand 'em over, before I cash in your coupons for you."

The overstuffed cat grinned and twirled his whiskers. "It is you, the great Dex Dogtective, who are about to fall from grace . . . or should I say, be pushed?"

Dex spotted a small army of hairless hamster icons dressed as ninjas watching the action. With a shrug, Dex flicked a raisin into the air with his thumb.

"If I had a raisin for every time I've heard that one . . . ," Dex said coolly, catching the raisin in his mouth.

The hamster ninjas charged from all sides as the cat yelled, "Pulverize him!"

But these Ikes were no match for the great Dex

Dogtective—not on this day or any other. Dex quickly pummeled the ninjas with his own smooth martial arts moves, including a final roundhouse kick that sent them all sliding off the balloon.

As the ninjas fell screaming, the fat cat took a step back.

"Okay, it's just you and me," Dex said, staring into the cat's yellow eyes. "Fork over the little guys and no one gets hurt."

The mewling kittens tried to escape, but the cat slammed the basket lid shut. "Never!" he growled. "I need these miserable fleabags to make my new black market Kitty Litter Cookies!"

"I'm sending you to the cooler," Dex said as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a tiny pink cocktail sword. "And by the way, that kitty litter cookie thing is the worst idea I have ever heard. Seriously."

The cat pulled a large kitty litter machine gun and laughed. He thought he had Dex outgunned until the great Dogtective casually punctured the top of the balloon with his tiny sword.

The cat's eyes widened as he watched Dex flip

from the bursting balloon and catch the falling basket of kittens. In midair, Dex whipped out his price tag gun, aimed at the top of Raisin City Music Hall, and let fly a cord of stickers.

As the stickers caught hold, Dex swung around, grabbed the top of a flagpole, and catapulted himself high above the city. Doing a neat triple flip, he gently dropped into the center of Produce Park with the precious basket of kitties.

Every Ike in town cheered as, somewhere in the background, the screaming cat whooshed around the store, clutching the doomed balloon.

Dex handed the purring kittens over to Hairy Hold, a fastidious British hair-care product Ike. Hairy never had a single one of his red fox hairs out of place. He was a little *too* finicky about his looks for Dex's taste, but the Dogtective had a live-and-let-live attitude. Every brand icon had its place on the shelves.

Just another day's work in the city that never sleeps, Dex thought as he unzipped his jacket, revealing a white tuxedo. *Now it's time to get down to the real business at hand.*

But before Dex could make his way through the throng of adoring produce icons, including the chatty Lola Fruitola, he was stopped by Hedda Shopper. She was a parrot newspaper reporter Ike from the in-store newspaper.

"Dex, Dex. Hedda Shopper here! This makes five hundred consecutive cases you've solved as head of the United Supermarket Defense Association. What's your secret?"

Dex flashed his trademark grin. "The secret's inside," he said, giving his classic handgun salute to the cheering crowd.

"All right, all right. Show's over," a voice shouted to the crowd. As the smiling Ikes parted, Dex saw his best friend, Dan, giving the orders. Dan, the well-known chocolate squirrel Ike for Daredevil Dan's Pure Milk Chocolate, was climbing down from his sleek XJ-1 rocket plane.

"My dog Dex and I got important business to do together," Dan said to the crowd, waving them away. Then he leaned toward the parrot reporter. "That would be Dex and his *best* friend, Daredevil Dan, the man. As in *me*. Did I say 'important'?"

When the crowd finally disappeared, Dex's tuxedoed, tough-guy exterior slumped. "The real secret," Dex said to his friend, "is I'm scared out of my mind. Tonight's the night, Dan!"

Dan shrugged. "No worries. You can do it . . . as long as you've got *me* to help you."

Dex nodded and shakily took a small ring box from his pocket. "Right. Okay. I can handle this," he said, opening the box and displaying the impressive produce. "What do you think?" he asked hopefully.

"Whoa, four carrots!" Dan said, nodding at the four *real* carats on the diamond engagement ring.

"Yeah, but do you think she'll like it? What if she doesn't like it?"

"Relax, bro, we're talking about Sunshine Goodness! You could give her a ring from a box of Cracker Jacks and she'd still say yes."

"Everything's got to be just perfect tonight," Dex said, still anxious about proposing to the most beautiful girl ever to adorn a box of raisins. "Now, you're sure you know what to do?"

Dan patted the lovesick dog on the back. "I was born knowin' what to do. I'm the most death-defying, stunt-flying milk chocolate squirrel—"

Dex interrupted him. "Dan, one more thing . . . will you be my best man?"

The chocolate squirrel quit the shameless

self-promotion and threw himself onto Dex in a bear hug. "You bet your box top!" Dan shouted.

In the distance, Dex heard someone call the name of the girl who made his cereal turn soggy in milk. Some of the candy kid Ikes from the next aisle were yelling, "Sunshine! Sunshine, catch!"

They threw a melon, which sailed over Sunshine's hands and hit Dan in the back of the head with the pleasant thump of fresh produce. "Thanks for playing with us, Sunshine!" the chubby-faced kids yelled. "See you tomorrow, Sunshine!"

Dan forced a smile and tossed the melon back to the candy Ikes who surrounded the always-radiant Sunshine Goodness Raisin girl.

"Oh, Dan," Sunshine said, smiling and helping Dan to his feet, "that was so nice of you."

"It was?" the squirrel asked, still a little dazed.

"You bet," she said with a wink. "The way you saved Dex from ruining his spiffy tux."

"Oh, yeah, well sure, that's what friends are for," Dan mumbled.

Sunshine leaned in to give Dex a kiss. "Hungry, tough guy?" she asked him. "How about we get

Maximilius Moose to make us huge hot dogs for dinner? My treat."

Dan's eyes brightened. "Great idea!" he said. "I'll take a foot-long with—" Dex shot Dan a look, and the chocolate squirrel took the hint.

"Um . . . gotta fly!" he said, quickly taking off in the direction of his chocolate rocket plane.

"See you later, Dan!" Sunshine said, smiling. She leaned closer to Dex. "Or we could play stickball with Lola."

"Well, *um*, actually," Dex said nervously, "I've scanned, *er*, I mean, planned plum-thing, *er*, I've planned something special tonight."

"Ooh—let me guess—a romantic hot-air balloon ride, perhaps? Oh, no, you just did that. Was it hard to beat up those itsy-bitsy hamsters?" Sunshine twirled and did a roundhouse kick. "By the way, you stole that last move from me."

"Really?" Dex asked, surprised.

He beamed at Sunshine as she playfully pinched his cheek. "Don't believe me? Well, listen, Sherlock, just cuz every Ike in town relies on you to protect them doesn't mean I couldn't kick your butt!"

"Anytime," Dex said, leaning in to grab her.

"Want some?" Sunshine teased, pushing Dex away and batting her lovely eyelashes.

"Oh, yeah," Dex answered.

Sunshine opened a box of raisins and flicked one high into the air. They both watched as it hovered for a second, then dropped right into Dex's mouth.

Sunshine laughed.

Dex swept her into his arms.

"Why, Mr. Dogtective, are you sweeping me off my feet?"

Dex smiled and hugged his Sunshine. "I'm working on it," he told her with a grin.

Dex led Sunshine to his favorite club in the produce section.

Maximilius Moose, headwaiter and sometimes bouncer, greeted them and led the couple to a candlelit table outside. "Uh, your table's ready," the tuxedoed moose said to Dex.

Maximilius helped Sunshine into her chair. "We's got caviar, fillets mig-nons, and a fine selection of fruits and veg-et-tables,"

he said with a thick Brooklyn accent.

Sunshine beamed. "Oh, Dex, this is so great."

Dex gulped. It was now or never. The ring was in his pocket.

"Sunshine," he said when the big moose finally left, "you mean the world—"

"*What?*" Sunshine squawked, trying to hear Dex over the club's music. Maximilius was playing a violin, adding to the cacophony, and moving closer to the table.

Dex shouted, "YOU MEAN THE WORLD TO ME," into Sunshine's ear, then shot a look at the moose's screeching violin. "MAXIMILIUS!"

The big moose stopped playing. "Uh, I likes you, too," he said, confused, then looked at Sunshine. "Oh. Youse means her."

Dex rolled his eyes. Somehow, Maximilius got the hint and backed away as Dex tried to recapture the moment.

"I just want to take care of you, baby," he told Sunshine.

She fluttered her eyelashes. "I do feel so safe in your arms, and I'm so proud of you, Dex. But I

worry when you're on a dangerous case."

Dex squared his wide shoulders. "I'll be fine. Have to be, to make sure nothing bad ever happens to you."

"Always, Dex?"

"Forever, kitten." Dex took a deep breath and said, "Here goes: Sunshine, will you—"

But before he could get the words out, the roar of a jet engine filled the air. Dex sighed and thought, *What are the odds that's a milk chocolate XJ-1, piloted by a deranged squirrel who's supposed to be flying at a much higher altitude?*

"Take cover!" Maximilius yelled. "He's gonna crash . . . again!"

As the rush of the jet engine sent food and silverware flying, Sunshine stood up, delighted. "It looks like Dan's drawing a picture," she said brightly as Dan managed to pull up just in time.

Sunshine squinted and tried to get a better look at what Dan was skywriting. She gasped. "It's of us!" she exclaimed to Dex. "That's so cute! But what's he trying to draw in your hand?"

Dex looked up at Dan's skywriting attempt.

"What I've been trying to ask you all night, Sunshine, will you—"

"Oh, no!" Sunshine cried as she saw Dan take the nose of the plane up. "He's not going to try to . . ."

Inside the jet, Dan was trying to psych himself up. "Okay, I just gotta loop d'loop to make the engagement ring. No problem, 'cause I'm gonna dare the day and . . ."

"Fly away!" Sunshine said, cheering the squirrel on. "Come on, Dan, you can do it this time!"

Dex pulled the ring from his pocket. "Sunshine," he said, trying to get her attention, "will you—"

"DARE THE DAY," the squirrel shouted as he reached the top of the loop, "AND—"

"Not today," Sunshine said, and winced as Dan spiraled out of control. Everyone cringed as the plane crashed in the distance.

"I'd better go check on Dan," Sunshine said, "just to make sure he's okay."

Sunshine stood up as Dex said, "I'm sure he's fine. Dan always crashes. Like yesterday, for example. And the day before."

Sunshine smiled. "When in doubt, just do the

right thing and it'll always turn out."

"But I was trying to ask you—"

"Don't worry," Sunshine said, leaving Dex with the ring in his hand. "It'll just take a minute! I'll be right back."

But a short while later, Dex reached the crash site first. He paced nervously as Dan surveyed the jet's damage. "I don't understand it," Dex said, worried out of his mind. "Sunshine went to check on you right after the crash. Where is she?"

Holding an ice pack to his head, Dan shrugged. "You know Sunshine; she's the sweetest Ike in Marketropolis. She probably ran into a friend who needed her help."

Dex shook his head and stared at the engagement ring. "Why didn't I just do it?"

Dan took his old buddy by the arm. "C'mon," he said to Dex, "it's getting late. I mean, early. You know the rule: we've got to be out of sight before the market opens."

"But I never got to ask her to walk down the aisle with me!"

"Chill, dog," Dan said, trying to cheer up his friend. "You can pop the question tomorrow night. Don't worry. It isn't like it's the last time you're ever gonna see Sunshine again."

Dex nodded, but the idea that he would never see Sunshine again hung on his heart like frost on a Popsicle.

Six months later, it was business as usual for old Mr. Leonard. He had a cleanup on aisle six, a display to set up on aisle seven, and several carts with squeaky wheels that needed oil. He was happily going about his day when he noticed a delivery truck at the door. On the truck's side were a huge black *X* and the slogan "Brand X—A Better Way of Life." A tall, thin man marched into Mr. Leonard's store. "May I help you?" Mr. Leonard asked.

"You must be Mr. Leonard, the manager. I'm your new Brand X representative, Mr. Clipboard," the man said, looking over Mr. Leonard's partially balding head and peering down the aisles.

Suddenly, two Brand X deliverymen began wheeling in stacks of Brand X boxes. "I wasn't expecting any new products," Mr. Leonard said as

the men rolled the boxes right past him.

"Corporate picked your store to test the new Brand X Detergent," the thin man said, marking his clipboard. He pointed at the plain, colorless boxes. "With Elixir!" he added in an official tone.

Mr. Leonard didn't know whether to be happy. "Brand X, huh? Never heard of it."

The thin man twitched at the remark, then bashed himself in the head with his clipboard. "Give us one week," he said confidently. "Your customers won't know how they lived without Brand X."

"But everything is so nice the way it is. We don't have space," Mr. Leonard argued.

"Oh, I'll make space," Mr. Clipboard said with a smile.

Mr. Leonard smiled back awkwardly, but he couldn't help feeling that there was a hint of menace in the man's words.

Mr. Leonard tried to keep up as the tall, thin man hurried down the aisles. "Wait until you get a whiff of our Brand X Elixir. It's practically addicting!"

The man's bony arm accidentally knocked a bag of Kaptain Krispy chips to the floor. Then, without a

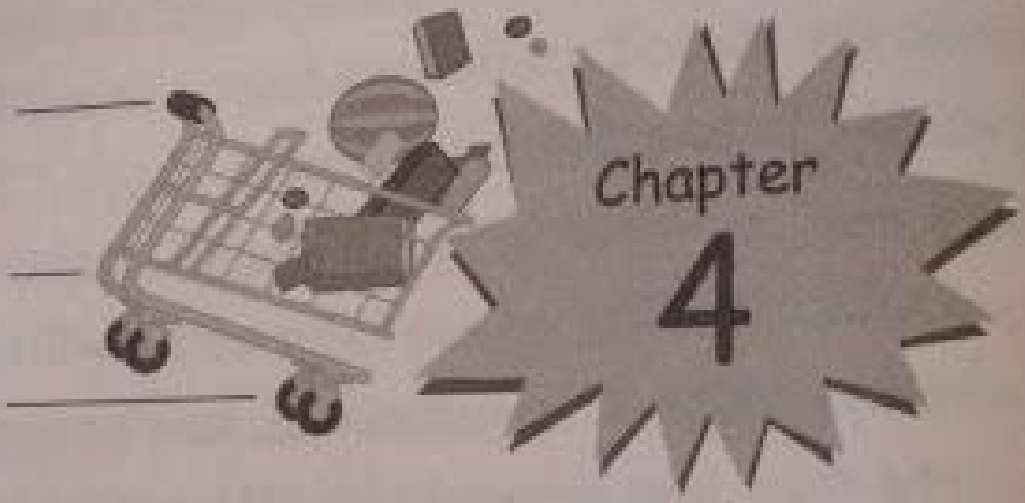
second thought, Mr. Clipboard crushed the bag of chips with the heel of his boot as he continued down the aisle. Mr. Leonard was shocked.

"That was a perfectly good bag of chips," Mr. Leonard said, kneeling on the floor and cradling the bag of broken chips. "Never opened, never enjoyed."

But the man just ignored him. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

As Mr. Clipboard walked by, unbeknownst to him or any other humans, a near riot was brewing within Kaptain Krispy's bag of chips.

"No one wastes me chips and gets away with it," Kaptain Krispy growled. The pirate icon vowed, "Brand X will pay!"



Poor Mr. Leonard sighed as he stared at the new Brand X display. It was a giant cardboard washing machine bulging into the aisle of his tidy little store. A sign above it proclaimed: REJOICE! BRAND X HAS ARRIVED!

He shook his head as he switched off the lights that night. For the first time, old Mr. Leonard drove away from his beloved market feeling a little uneasy.

As the sun set, the supermarket transformed into the city of Marketropolis, but its streets were empty. Only strange cries drifted down the windswept aisles and through the littered back alleys.

"Sunshine! Where are you? I'll find you, Sunshine!"

"Dex! Help me, Dex! Please find me! Dex!"

"Sunshine! I'm coming, Sunshine!"

"Don't leave me, Dex! I need you. I need you. I need—"

Daredevil Dan suddenly burst into his friend's apartment.

"Sunshine!" Dex shouted in his sleep. "I'm coming, Sunshine!"

"Dex, wake up!" Dan said, shaking him.

In Dex's dream, he was following a trail of raisins that seemed to lead nowhere. Dan shook him harder. Dex's eyes snapped open as he sat up and gasped.

"You were having the nightmare again, weren't you?" Dan asked, looking down at his haggard friend.

Dex didn't answer. He got up from the sofa, where he had fallen asleep, and stumbled to the sink. Splashing cold water on his face, he hung his head, trying to make sense of it all.

"I miss her, too," Dan told him sympathetically. "But it's been six months. Sunshine's gone, bro. We have to accept it."

Dex shook his head. "I can't. I failed her."

"It wasn't your fault. You kept this place running

smooth as a smoothie and all of us safe," Dan said pointing at the newspaper articles tacked on Dex's wall. Every one of them was about a triumph by the great Dogtective. "Just look at these clippings," Dan said, "talking about all the hundreds of cases you solved."

But Dex stared at only one set of clippings—the bad ones. "Oh, yeah," he said. "What about these? 'Raisin Riddle a Mystery,' 'Leads Dry as Prunes.'"

Dex turned away from the wall. He knew the next headline by heart.

"'Sunshine Goodness Gone without a Trace. Dex Dogtective Hangs Up His Hat.' The only case that ever really mattered, and I couldn't solve it," Dex said through his clenched teeth. "Now she's gone. . . . Sunshine, my only Sunshine."

"But at least we've still got each other, right?" Dan offered, putting his arm around Dex. "Cinnamon and chocolate together forever!"

Dex pulled away. The chocolate squirrel looked at the suffering dog. There was nothing left to do but level with him and hope for the best.

"Okay, so your detective days are over." Dan

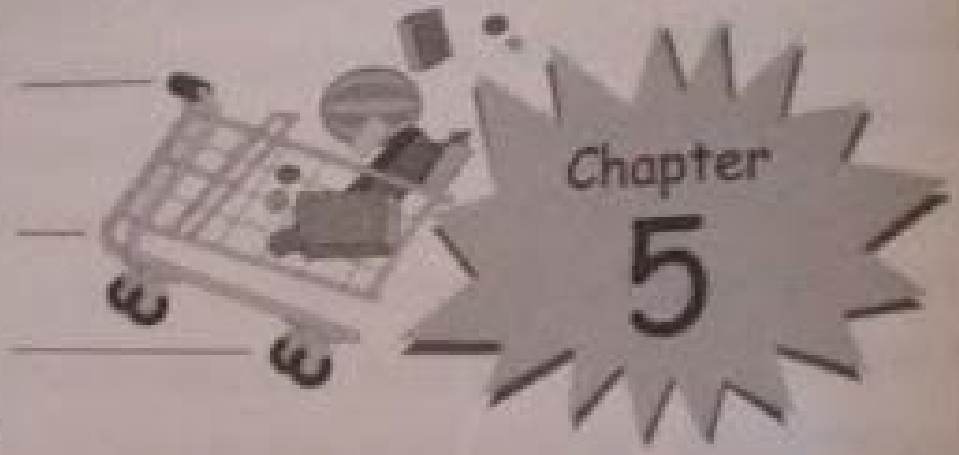
said, moving toward the door. "But now you got a club to run. And you can bet the CopaBanana's gonna be buzzin' tonight; everyone's talking about how Krispy's bag got crunched. Anyway, you want a lift? I got my wings outside."

"I think I'll walk," Dex said absentmindedly.

Dan hesitated. "You're sure you're cool?"

"Yeah," Dex said, trying to smile. "Thanks, pal."

As Dan left the room, Dex reached into his pocket and pulled out a faded box of Sunshine Goodness Raisins. He flipped a raisin into the air. It hovered for a second, then hit him—*bonk!*—right on the nose. Dex shook his head. "It's just not the same without you, Sunshine," he said, staring at the label.



The Main Street aisle of Marketropolis was lit up and bustling like Times Square on a summer night. Dex had put on a clean tuxedo and was making his way to the CopaBanana when Hairy Hold called to him. "Dex, Dex, wait up! The United Supermarket Defense Association needs your help."

"What's wrong, Hairy, losin' your hold?" Dex asked as he kept walking.

Hairy grabbed Dex's arm. "Dex, you have to help me. I'm at my split ends. There are witnesses who insist this Brand X salesman deliberately crushed Kaptain Krispy's bag."

Dex shrugged and kept walking. "So investigate. You're the head of the USDA these days. I run the CopaBanana Club now."

Hairy was in a panic. "But the store ran so well

when you were the chief. It's just not the same anymore."

Dex nodded. "Nothing is," he said flatly.

"Dex, when are you going to stop blaming yourself for Sunshine's disappearance?" Hairy said. Dex froze as every brand icon on the street gasped. They stared, waiting to see what Dex would do next.

Lucky for Hairy, a jet engine roared overhead. It was Dan.

As Dex looked up, Hairy ducked from the street, shouting, "Duty calls! Much to do."

"Yo, Dex!" Dan shouted, pointing at the back of his plane. "This ought to really pack the place!"

Dex smiled as he read the banner: GET JUICED AT THE COPABANANA TONIGHT!

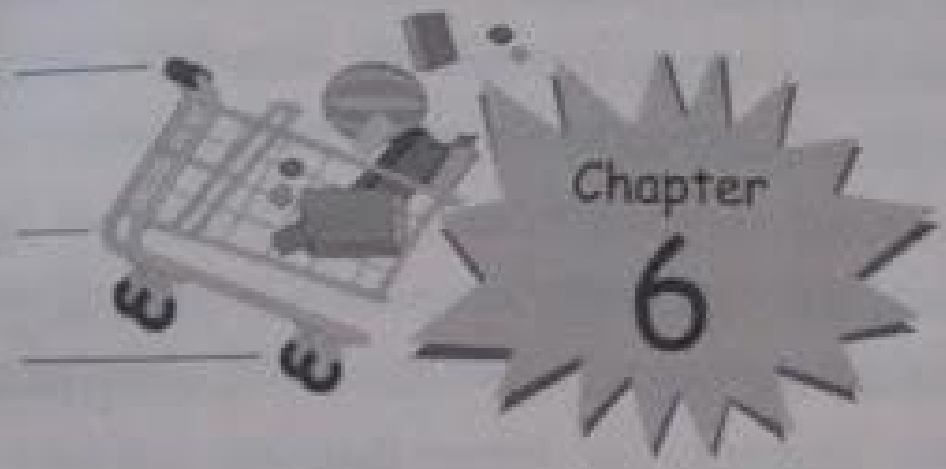
Dan called down to a cupcake Ike on the corner. "Yo, yo, Sweet Cakes! Check this out!" He raised the nose of the jet, trying to do a loop. "You drive me loopy, baby!" the squirrel shouted enthusiastically. "DARE THE DAY!"

Sweet Cakes rolled her eyes and walked on. "Get a shelf life," she yelled over her shoulder as Dan's plane began to spiral out of control.

Dan frantically tried to pull the plane up as it nose-dived. But it was no use, so he hit the Eject button as the plane crashed through a mass of tangled branches and smashed into the tree-shaped factory of some elf Ikes.

Too late, Dan's ejection seat finally worked, tossing him out of the cockpit and into a wheelbarrow full of fudge. The panicking factory workers were outraged.

Dan's parachute suddenly popped open, and the silk fluttered over him. From under the parachute, he told the gathering group of angry Ikes, "I'm good! Just testing my chute. I'm cool."



Between Main Street and the produce section was a seedy back alley known as the Discount Aisle District. Life was cheap in this part of town. It was where the low class and the low priced hung out and the damaged goods and dented cans made their last desperate attempts to be sold. On some nights, Dex used it as a shortcut to and from the CopaBanana. This was one of those nights.

As Dex moved through the shadowy alley, he saw Polar Penguin, an Ike who belonged in the freezer section, being turned upside down by Cheazel the Weasel. The weasel was looking to make a fast buck or a greasy fistful of ill-gotten discount coupons.

"Why, of course I can sell you a VIP pass to the CopaBanana," the weasel whispered to the penguin.

"Excuth me, thir, I seem to be catching a draft up

here," the chilly penguin said, his teeth chattering despite his wearing mittens and earmuffs. Smelt fell from his pockets as he searched for coupons.

"But my very *im*portant *f*riend, you don't appear to have the necessary coupons for such a pricey purchase," the weasel said with mock sympathy.

Dex stopped. He knew that the penguin was about to be taken for everything he had. "Let him go, Cheazel," Dex said.

The weasel instantly dropped the penguin on his head and smiled nervously. "Dex! What a pleasant surprise."

The penguin quickly waddled away as Dex gave the weasel a stern look and resumed his walk to the CopaBanana.

The cheese weasel tried to catch up. Since he couldn't make a dime off the penguin, he hoped to make a small score with Dex. He had a few items the Dogtective might find interesting: poker chips, a few hot watches, and other supermarket debris. Dex stared the weasel down. "You despise me, don't you?" the rodent said.

Just then, a blinding flash of light caused Dex

and Cheazel the Weasel to squint. It was the store trolley, which cut through that part of town. Unfortunately, the weasel seemed to be standing right in the middle of the tracks.

Dex jumped onto the moving trolley as it ran the weasel down. The Dogtective watched the pained rodent slither away.

As the trolley pulled into Produce Park, Dex could hear the music coming from the CopaBanana. Searchlights crisscrossed the sky. The place was jammed, and the party was in full swing.

Dex walked down the red carpet as cameras flashed. "Dex, Dex!" Hedda Shopper called out. "Any new ladies on your plate? Is there a new squeeze at the juice bar? News flash . . . ," she said, batting her eyelashes at Dex. "I'm available." But Dex kept walking. No one could replace Sunshine in his life.

"How's it scratchin', boss?" Maximilius Moose asked as he let Dex through the velvet-rope entry.

Just then, Dex noticed Polar Penguin step into the crowd of Ikes hoping to get into the club.

He pointed out the penguin to Maximilius. "Make it one more," he said to the moose.

"Polar Penguin?" Maximilius asked, checking his VIP list. "Dat don't ring no bells."

"From Polar Penguin ithe cream," the penguin said brightly. "Is it just me, or is anyone else cold?"

The moose gave Dex a smile, silently acknowledging the boss's soft side. The penguin waddled past the group of envious Ikes.

"If you're ever in frothen foodth, Mr. Dogtective, you've got a friend!" the penguin said. Dex flashed his signature handgun salute and disappeared into the club.

Inside, the maître d', an upmarket canned fish Ike, led guests through the bustling crowd. "Follow me. And watch the tail," he said, escorting the guests to their tables.

Dex turned away from the crowd and faced the bar. "Got milk?" he asked the bartender.

"Do I look like a dairy queen to you?" Lola answered. "And besides," she asked as she opened a fresh carton of milk, "haven't you had enough?"

Dex shrugged and quickly drank the glass of milk.

she'd poured. "It sure does a body good."

As Dex poured himself another glass of milk, he overheard a conversation at the bar that was getting louder and louder.

"Crush me bag, will he?" Kaptain Krispy growled. "Well, I'll make Brand X pay for it, I will!"

Dex raised his glass to old Krispy. "It's hard to lose something you care about, Kap," he said sympathetically, "but you'd better go easy on the potato juice before you get chip-faced."

It was too late. Krispy passed out facedown in a bowl of chips on the bar.

Chapter 7

Meanwhile, Dan was riding a slow horse-drawn chuck wagon through the cleaning supplies aisle of Marketropolis. He'd hoped to arrive on Main Street in style, but every taxi and banana boat was taken.

Dan was trying not to lose his confidence, but riding this dog chow wagon wasn't going to help his image at all.

"Dare the day. Just dare the day," Dan said to himself. He did a backflip off the wagon and landed facedown with a splat!

Someone started clapping slowly. "Nice play," a woman's voice said. "Bet you nail it next time."

"Count on it!" Dan said, looking up at the towering Brand X Detergent building. In front of it stood a tall woman in a tight red dress.

She leaned over and tickled Dan under his chin

"So, handsome, what do you suggest to a lady looking for a good time?"

"B-B-B-Banana!" Dan stammered.

The woman shrugged. "I prefer zucchini," she said.

Dan got to his feet. "The club!" he said, breaking into a bucktoothed grin. "I meant the club. The CopaBanana. I'm tight with Dex Dogtective."

The sultry woman raised an eyebrow. "*Hmm*," she said, smiling. "Guess this is my lucky night. Maybe yours, too."

Still seated at the bar, Dex was staring at the faded raisin label he always carried with him. Lola set a bowl of raisins on the bar.

Dex tossed a raisin into the air as Lola watched hopefully. He leaned back, trying to catch it in his mouth, and fell off the barstool.

Lola sighed and went back to drying glasses with a dishrag.

Dex found his way back to the barstool just as Dan walked through the doors, yelling, "Yo, Dex!"

The chocolate squirrel was grinning from ear to

ear. "We got us a hot new delivery," he said, panting. "The Brand X Detergent Ike . . . Lady X! And she's got a real sweet tooth!" he said, pointing at himself.

The front doors of the club suddenly burst open again, sending Dan flying into a corner. "I'm fine! 'Cause the lady is mine!" the squirrel shouted as he tried to regain his composure.

Lady X, the gorgeous Brand X Detergent icon in an eye-popping X-shaped red gown, flowed across the dance floor. All the Ikes in the room held their breath as she walked by.

Vlad, who had Rosa in a perfect dip, dropped her. The usually cool Tiki Taki, a breath mint Ike, belched fire. Polar Penguin stood up on his stool to get a better look, and his scarf got caught in the ceiling fan. He spun around for a few seconds, then went flying toward Lady X.

Lady X didn't even flinch as the penguin whizzed by her head and crashed into a waiter.

She heard a small whimper and, looking down, saw that she was standing on the tail of the maître d'.

"Sorry," she said nonchalantly to the tuna, and started walking toward Dex.

Dex sighed, "Of all the produce bars in all the supermarkets in all the world, she had to walk into mine."

She stopped in front of Dex and gave him the once-over. "Dex Dogtective," she said. "I've already heard so much about you."

"Aisle gossip," the Dogtective replied, looking away.

Lady X leaned toward him. "My favorite kind," she whispered as Dex got a whiff of her perfume.

"That scent," Dex said, twitching his nose, "there's something familiar about it."

Lady X leaned closer. "My secret ingredient," she whispered, smiling. "Like it?"

"It's amazing," Dex told her. A strange hypnotized sparkle shined in his eyes. He shook his head to clear it.

"So, Dogtective," Lady X went on, "word on the shelves is you're in charge of this store."

"You've been misinformed," Dex told her flatly. "Hairy Hold's running things now. I don't get involved anymore."

Lady X nodded. "Perhaps because you haven't

had the right *special offer*," she said, raising an eyebrow.

Dex set his drink down. "What are you in the market for?"

Lady X laughed. "What does any product icon want?" she said, running her hands over her silky dress. "A package no one can keep their hands off."

Before she could say more, Dan popped up next to them.

"Yo, who's your sugar daddy?" he asked, draping his arm around Lady X's waist.

Just then, old Krispy woke up and lunged at Lady X. "Hold anchor!" Krispy shouted. "There's something dirty about this detergent!"

"Now, is that any way to talk to a lady?" she said to Dan. The plucky squirrel immediately rose to her defense. Krispy took a swing at Dan, who fainted.

"Yo!" Dan said, springing safely to his feet again behind Dex. "I'm down, then up. Now let me at 'im."

Dex held Krispy back. "You had a bad break today, Krispy. But don't take your troubles out on Dan."

Krispy whistled for reinforcements. Suddenly every salty Ike in the joint was standing behind him.

"Looks like things are a little sour between the sugar and salt icons," Lady X said coolly as the sweets stood ready to back Dan up.

Dex raised his hand, hoping to avoid a brawl. "This is not a condiment conspiracy. Chill out."

"No," Krispy answered angrily. "We're not leaving here till this wench tells us why her rep stomped me poor bag."

"Is it really my fault you have inferior packaging?" Lady X asked with a shrug.

"Yeah," Dan agreed, pointing at old Krispy, "you aren't exactly new and improved!"

"This spud's for you!" Krispy yelled as he threw a roundhouse punch at Dan. The CopaBanana suddenly exploded into a full-on bar fight.

"Revenge will be mine!" Krispy shouted as he tried to pummel Dan.

"Back off, you saturated fathead!" Dan said angrily.

Dex spun and knocked Kaptain Krispy off Dan and right into Maximilius Moose's open arms.

Dex raised a barstool over his head when a high-pitched scream caused every Ike to freeze.

It was Polar Penguin. He was on top of the stoo
that Dex was about to swing. "Pleathe bear in mind
I am in f-f-fact f-f-f-flightless!" the penguin pleade
through his chattering teeth. Dex gently set the stoo
down and took a breath. "Party's over!" he shoute
above the noise of the rowdy crowd. "Time t
banana split out of my club."

As the bar cleared out, Lady X stared at Dex
impressed. "Guess we know who's top dog in this
town," she said, admiring him, then staring
contemptuously down at Hairy Hold, who was
peeking fearfully out from under a table.

Maximilius was about to toss Dan out the door
when the squirrel pleaded, "Yo, Dex! Who's your
buddy? Who's your pal? Max, my man!"

"I prefer *Maximilius*. And da boss don't play
favorites."

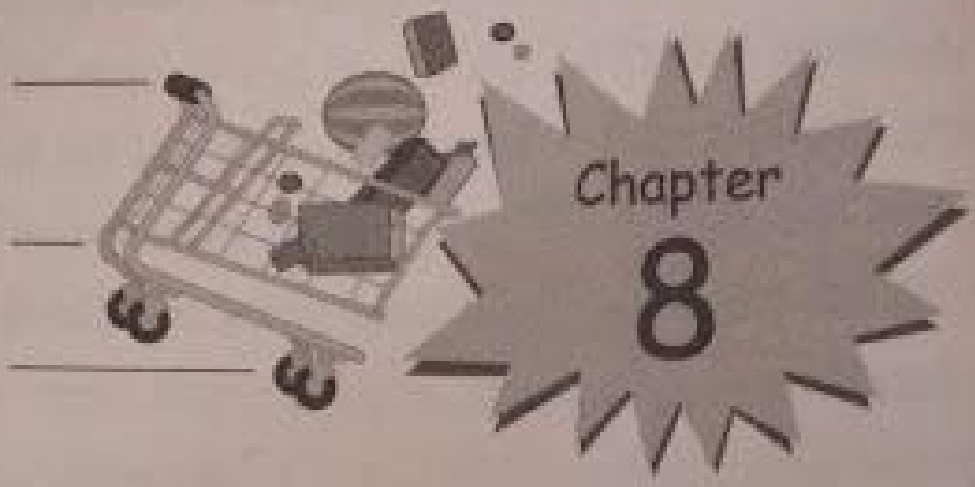
Dex gave the moose a nod. "It's okay
Maximilius; let Dan go."

"What about me?" Lady X said to Dex. "You
hanging me out to dry?"

Dex shook his head. "I'm not sure what to do
with you."

Dan moved over to the Brand X bombshell and said, "C'mon, baby."

Lady X slipped her arm over Dan's. She looked at Dex as she and the happy squirrel headed for the door. "What can I say?" she said to Dex. "Chicks dig chocolate."



Later that night, Dex made his way back to his apartment in the cereal section of town. As he opened the door, the first things he saw were the yellowed newspaper clippings about Sunshine on his bulletin board. Dex sat on his sofa and held his head in his hands. "Some Dogtective you turned out to be," he said to himself.

Suddenly, Lady X was standing in Dex's open doorway.

"Crying over spilt milk?" she asked him.

"What are you doing here?" Dex snapped.

She stepped in and closed the door. "I've got a hot case for you," she said, taking off her coat. "I'm looking for a guy. About your height. Same great build, same strong jaw. Only difference is this guy isn't living in the past."

She moved closer and Dex got another whiff of her perfume. "I . . . I can't help you," Dex told her.

"Maybe I can help you get a clean start on a new relationship," Lady X offered.

Dex moved across the room, trying to shake off the scent of her perfume. "So what happened to Dan?" he asked. "You already eat through to his hollow center?"

"He said the sugars and salts were going to finish what they started. The aisles aren't safe tonight for a helpless lady like me," Lady X replied.

"Sorry," Dex said. "I'm not buying this damsel-in-distress routine. You've been through the wash plenty. I can see it in your eyes."

Lady X looked away. "You're right, Dex. I'm not new. Last year I wasrecalled. But I'm changed now. New ingredients. Repackaged, with a fresh scent. I want to forget my past. Just like you do."

Dex looked at the pictures of Sunshine. "I can't forget," he said.

"Oh, but you're wrong, Dex," Lady X said, dabbing more perfume behind her ears. "I can wash away your memories."

Dex felt himself weakening as the scent filled the room. Lady X wafted toward him, about to plant a big kiss on the Dogtective, when a bloodcurdling scream from the aisles broke the spell. Dex dashed to the door and headed for the streets.

"Wait!" Lady X called out. "I haven't shown you my secret ingredient."

The crime scene had been cordoned off with yellow price tags by the time Dex arrived. There they were, expired Ikes, lying all over the sidewalk.

"Dex, thank goodness you're here!" Hairy Hold cried as he saw the Dogtective make his way through the crowd.

"The salts and sugars," Hairy said with a shiver. "It must have been an all-out war!"

Maximilius Moose soon joined Dex at the scene. "How many Ikes went down?" Dex asked.

"Maybe thirty, boss," the moose answered. "Everyone we tossed out of the 'Banana. Dan and Lady X is da only ones missing."

"And the lady's got an alibi," Lady X said as she sauntered up to the crime scene. "Dex and I were

just . . . talking. I warned him there might be trouble."

As investigators dusted for prints with baby powder, Hairy Hold suddenly gasped. "Oh, dear," Hairy said as they began to remove the bodies, "they're bringing the body bags."

It was a terrible night in Marketropolis, all right. The moose shook his head as he spoke to Dex. "Boss, all them Ikes," he said sadly. "We all knows when a product loses its icon—it spoils, goes bad. So whats can we do?"

"Nothing," Dex replied grimly. "We're the soul of our products. Without us, they're gone."

Maximilius understood. Without its brand icon, a product just couldn't survive in the world.

As they took the expired Roma Extra-Salty Pepperoni Pizza Sauce icon away, sauce was already oozing from the Roma Pepperoni building.

"I've never seen anything like this," Lady X said.

"Oh, we have," Hairy told her. "When Sunshine Goodness disappeared, her boxes faded, raisins soured. The only difference was her body was never . . ." Hairy suddenly saw the look on Dex's face. "Uh, found anything interesting, Dex?"

The Dogtective was happy to change the subject. "These Ikes didn't expire in a rumble," Dex said. "Somebody just wants it to look that way."

Dex leaned over and scraped a thin coating of ice from the Viking Ice Cream Sandwich icon lying at his feet. "Freezer burn," Dex declared, knowing that these deaths had been planned. "He was spoiled before his time. Looks like all these poor Ikes were rubbed out."

Hairy Hold was stunned. "But why?" he asked nervously. "How? Who?"

Lady X suddenly said, "Dan—he said he was going to get back at the salts. His plan must have backfired."

The crowd of Ikes outside the crime scene tape shouted, "Daredevil Dan! Let's get him! String him up by the tail!"

"Hold it!" Dex said to the angry mob. "Dan would never do anything like this."

Hairy Hold knew he had trouble on his hands. "We have to find him before the rest of the salts do!"

"Then you'd better start styling, Hairy," Dex said flatly.

"Me?" Hairy said. He hated being in charge. "I can't! You have to help us, Dex! Before I go bald." Hairy saw a bald cleaning Ike frown. "Not that bald isn't beautiful," he added with an apologetic smile.

"Don't tell me the great Dogtective's running away with his tail between his legs," Lady X said with a swish of her hips.

But Dex didn't hesitate. "I don't get involved anymore," he told her, and turned to walk away.

As Maximilius Moose and Dex left the scene, Maximilius said, "After losing Sunshine, boss, I thoughts ya'd never smiles again. But Dan was there for youse."

Dex clenched his jaw. Deep down, he knew that the moose was right.

The next morning, the doors of the market burst open. A stampede of frantic customers rushed toward the Brand X washing machine display. From the top of the machine, colored puffs of the detergent's fresh new scent wafted into the air.

The shoppers' eyes took on a strange sparkle as they breathed it in. Suddenly, they tore boxes from each other's hands, trying to get as much Brand X Detergent into their carts as they could.

"That's some elixir," Dex said as he watched the action from inside his Cinnamon Sleuth Cereal box.

On another aisle, Mr. Leonard was cleaning up the oozing pizza sauce from the night before. "Nothing harder than seeing good food go bad," he said to himself sadly.

A cold hand clasped Mr. Leonard's shoulder. It

was the tall, thin Brand X representative.

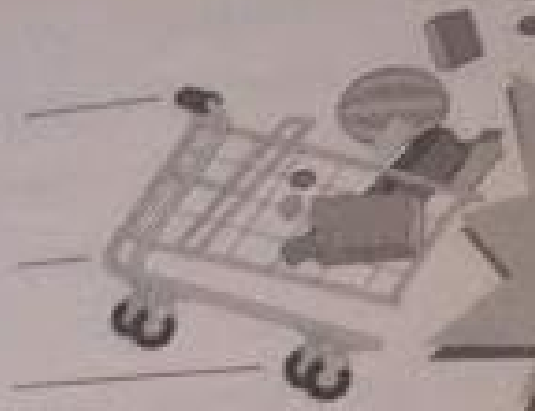
"Looks like we arrived just in time," the thin man said with a twisted smile. He made a few marks on his clipboard as loads of Brand X Pizza Sauce were wheeled in.

Dex used his telescope to get a better view.

"Brand X replacements for every Ike rubbed out last night," Dex said to himself. "Now, how did Mr. Clipboard over there know about that?"

He watched Mr. Leonard solemnly push a cart heaped with all the damaged products. *Poor Ikes,* Dex thought grimly. Then he began to wonder, turning to look at the Daredevil Dan's Pure Milk Chocolate display: *If the Ikes were all wiped out, then how did Dan survive and not wind up in the Expiration Station?*

Dex whipped his telescope around to see Mr. Leonard pushing the cart of damaged goods through the steel doors from which no Ike ever returned. Dex rubbed his chin, and his eyebrows drew together as the facts whirled around in his head. Something was definitely going bad—and it wasn't in the dairy aisle.



Chapter 10

The lights of Marketropolis shined more dimly now that thirty new colorless Brand X products filled the shelves. Inside his apartment, Dex paced, feeling in his gut that it was all tied together, but he just didn't know how.

"Something's wrong," Dex said as he paced. "Dan's in trouble. I just know it."

He looked at Sunshine's pictures. "I let you down, Sunshine," he said. "I just can't throw in the paper towel on Dan. He was your best friend, too."

Dex armed himself with every Dogtective gadget he owned. "I just hope I don't fail you both," he said as he left his apartment and headed to the streets.

At the same time, inside the deli case, Hairy Hal was having a meeting of all the major Ikes in

Marketropolis. Hairy banged a gavel and shouted, "I call this session of the United Supermarket Defense Association to order." But no one heard him over the chaos.

"Order!" Hairy yelled. "The USDA must come to order!

"Why is everyone screaming?" Hairy demanded. "This only concerns sugars and salts!"

"Not anymore," Lady X announced as she walked in with General X on one side and Lieutenant X on the other. The crowd watched in silence.

"Sugar versus salt is just the tip of the iceberg lettuce," she said. "General X, our esteemed potato chip icon, has just discovered a diabolical plot against cleaning product Ikes."

General X stepped forward and grunted. "Security around here is down the drain," he told the crowd. The worried cleaning products suddenly couldn't agree more. They began pumping their fists in the air as the mob of Ikes cheered them on.

"And who was behind this vicious plan?" Lady X asked, whipping the eager mob into a froth. She pointed at an Ike from the Asian foods

section. "*A specialty Ike*—Kung Tofu."

The crowd gasped as they looked at the small man. "But I am innocent," the Asian Ike told them.

Hairy pounded his gavel. "Everything's out of control!" he shouted as the crowd began to turn angry. "What can we do?"

"Perhaps it's time to institute a curfew?" Lady X said calmly. "So everyone can feel safe." The crowd hung on her every fresh-scented word.

"Yes, a curfew!" Hairy said enthusiastically. "Splendid idea! But that takes organization. How? Who would run it?"

"Well," Lady X said. "Brand X is thirty strong now. This is our home now, too. We want to help. Why not let my Ikes maintain order in the aisles?"

Maximilius Moose stood up. "Why you?" he asked. "Dex Dogtective has a solid history of cleaning up our spills. Let's convince him to come back."

The crowd began cheering wildly. Lady X grabbed Hairy's gavel and pounded it so hard she broke the podium. The crowd went silent.

"How can we pin our hopes on a Dogtective who couldn't even find his own girlfriend?" Lady X

asked, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Hold it!" Maximilius Moose shouted. "Dex tore this city apart searching for Sunshine! He didn't leave a box top unopened! Dex is the best Cinnamon Sleuth ever."

"*Was* the best," Lady X said, correcting Maximilius. "He quit. But I will never give up, because I care what happens to each and every one of you."

"But it's-s-s s-s-so dangerous," a worried Polar Penguin called to her.

"Don't cry for me, Polar Penguin," Lady X said bravely. "Trust me, Brand X will make everything better. You have my promise!"

The Ikes went wild for her sales pitch! "We will take care of you!" Lady X said as she smiled coolly at the grateful cheering crowd.

"But what about Dex?" Polar Penguin shouted.

"Oh, we'll take care of him, too," Lady X promised as a smile passed between her and her Brand X henchmen.

Chapter 11

Dex Dogtective knew that something was rotten and whether he liked it or not, he was on the case.

The first place he checked for clues was the Daredevil Dan's Pure Milk Chocolate display. He found Dan's jet. It was covered in party streamers and parked with one wheel up on a cookie package. *Looks like my furry friend had himself a pretty wild night,* Dex thought.

Meanwhile, beside the dimly lit canals of the Italian food aisle, Lieutenant X was peeling off coupons from a large roll and putting them into Cheazel the Weasel's hand. "The lady wants the Dogtective," Lieutenant X said.

"No problem," the anxious weasel replied. He twitched as he watched Lieutenant X slowly count

out the coupons. "If you weren't so desperately deficient with your coupon dispersal," the greedy weasel added.

Lieutenant X stopped counting. "Or I could just crush you," he said, staring cruelly into the weasel's eyes. The weasel took a step backward.

Cheazel the Weasel sighed.

"The Dogtective will be dropped off at the cleaner's," he assured Lieutenant X, then quickly opened his coat. "Speaking of clean, might I interest you in a toothbrush?"

Lieutenant X placed his hands on Cheazel's shoulders and pushed him ever so slightly. The weasel took another step back and fell into the canal below.

"I fear this will not end happily for me," Cheazel said, splashing to the water's surface.

Wet to the bone, Cheazel the Weasel made his way to a part of town he was more familiar with—the Discount Aisle District. He spotted Dex searching a construction site, still on the hunt for Dan.

"Everybody seems to be searching for the

squirrel," the weasel said, sidling up to Dex. "May-haps a reward for the reckless rodent would be in the offering?"

"If you've got something up that slimy sleeve, spill the beans," Dex told him, and kept walking.

The weasel caught up. "Perhaps I do; perhaps I don't." He smiled. "I seem to be suffering from a touch of train-induced amnesia."

Dex suddenly grabbed the weasel by the neck. "Tricks are for kids, Cheazel," he said, squeezing until the weasel's eyes bulged.

"Last night," the weasel choked, "I saw the chocolate fur ball heading towards the detergent aisle. You know, home of the lovely Lady X."

"When?" Dex growled, squeezing more tightly.

"Right . . . after the . . . screaming started," the weasel said, trying to breathe. Dex loosened his grip. "Most suspicious, eh?" the weasel asked, catching his breath.

"No way," Dex said. "I know Dan; he'd never leave the scene of a crime, not even for a hot dish like Lady X."

"But this dish is *ex*-tra spicy," Cheazel the Weasel

said, rubbing his neck with one hand while extending the other one palm up to Dex. "Might I remind you, my services are not voluntary."

Dex pulled out a wad of coupons. "It just doesn't add up," he said.

Always ready to make a sale, Cheazel quickly opened his coat. "May I suggest a calculator?" he asked as his arm accidentally hit a construction lever. "Lucky for you, I just happen to have—" But the weasel caught Dex's glance as the Dogtective looked up. Cheazel looked up to see a large wrecking ball high above his head.

"The pain, she is like an old friend," the weasel said wearily, looking at Dex as the wrecking ball fell.

"Note to self . . . ," the flattened weasel groaned as Dex walked away, "need new friends."

Chapter 12

Dex knew that Cheazel the Weasel's tip might have been a lie, but his Dogtective instincts had told him the hunt was going to end up at Lady X's door. Her penthouse apartment was on top of the huge Brand X Detergent washing machine display.

Dex threw his grappling hook onto the balcony of the penthouse and climbed to the top.

"I've still got it," he said to himself as he stood on the balcony overlooking all of Marketropolis. He confidently yanked on the grappling hook, which sailed toward him faster than he'd expected. As it smacked him in the head, Dex cringed. "And I thought the raisins were humiliating," he sighed, rubbing his forehead.

Dex shook off the setback and quietly opened the door to Lady X's luxury digs. Her apartment was

decorated in a bold red and black. *The lady's got style,* Dex thought as he looked around.

He picked up a fancy perfume bottle marked ELIXIR, opened it, and sniffed. His eyes sparkled as he was suddenly overcome by the perfume.

"Dex," Lady X said as she walked through the double French doors. "I wasn't expecting company."

Dex slipped the perfume bottle into his pocket. "I'd say things are going exactly how you expected."

Lady X clapped, and the lights of the penthouse dimmed to a romantic glow. She turned on some tango music and walked toward Dex. "How about joining me in a warm rinse?" she asked as she pulled him in to tango.

"I'm not that dirty," Dex said.

They both turned to the music and she kicked over a huge vase without missing a beat. "But being filthy can be loads of fun. Don't you think so, Dex?"

The two danced a tango across the room. "I want to know how you rubbed out all those Ikes last night," Dex said, leading Lady X into a dip.

"Me?" Lady X said, looking up at him innocently. "But I was with you, remember?"

"Yeah," Dex said, pulling her up, "trying to get me on the case before there even was one."

Lady X elegantly kicked, knocking over a lamp with the tip of her foot. "Naughty dog," she said. "I really have been on your mind, haven't I?"

"You've orchestrated this dance from the start," Dex said. "I think you hijacked Dan and you've got him squirreled away somewhere. My friend better be alive, or you're gonna check out of this store the hard way."

With strength that surprised Dex, Lady X suddenly pushed him into a dip. "Your crash dummy's fine. For now. But he won't be unless you back Brand X."

Dex nodded. "So that's your game."

They danced across the floor. "We could run this store, Dex," Lady X said. "An aisle all to ourselves. Packed tight. No markdowns for us. I could be your Sunshine."

The mention of Sunshine's name was like a slap in the face to Dex. He grabbed Lady X and spun her hard. "There will never be another Sunshine," he said. "Now, I'm takin' you in."

Lady X broke free and spun across the room, crashing into a tray of glasses. "Not before I solve your case for you," she said angrily. She hit a red button behind a painting of a Laundromat. A secret door opened, revealing large mosquito-like creatures.

"Meet my secret weapon: the *Xobytes*!" Lady X said proudly, pointing to the mechanical creatures, which had large stingers. "They took out your precious Ikes for me."

She gave the Xobytes a commanding wave, and they swarmed Dex. "And now it's time you learn to heel, Dogtective."

Dex pulled his price gun and fired a blaze of stickers at the evil creatures.

"Xobytes come standard with sticker-proof vests," Lady X said, laughing.

When Dex ran out of ammo, he took on the Xobytes with his bare hands. But the swarm was more than Dex could manage even with his martial arts skill. The Xobytes left the Dogtective lying unconscious on the floor.

"What a shame," Lady X sighed as she bent over

Dex's body. "We could have been like mac and cheese. Peanut butter and jelly."

Dex slowly opened his eyes, adjusting to the dim light of the metal chamber he found himself lying in. A drop of something suddenly splattered onto his nose. He gave it a taste—chocolate! "Dan?" Dex mumbled, looking up.

Sure enough, the worried squirrel was leaning over his friend, sweating chocolate droplets. Dan's eyes widened. "Dex!" he cried. "I knew you'd sniff me out!"

Dex sat up. "You okay, pal? Is your chocolate chipped?"

Dan threw himself onto Dex for a bear hug. "It was brutal! These giant X-O-biters slaughtered every Ike in sight. They didn't rub me out 'cause Lady X digs my fine flavor and so-sweet bod."

"Or," Dex said, "maybe she used you as bait to get me."

Dan was a little insulted. "Oh, like you're the only Ike who could rescue me, figure out her game, and shut her down." Dan thought for a second.

"Oh, yeah," he said to Dex, "you are."

"Too late," Lady X said from above. "Not even the *great* Dex Dogtective can save you now." She laughed and slammed the door on the top of the giant dryer. Dex and Dan were imprisoned in total darkness!

Lady X nodded at the Brand X Mashed Potato Man. He giddily turned the knob on the machine to the full-dry cycle.

"After they've *enjoyed* the *extra* hot cycle," Lady X said, smiling, "dump their bodies in the toothpaste aisle."

"We frame toothpastes now?" the Mashed Potato Man asked as he heard the machine whir to life.

Lady X shrugged. "Everyone knows toothpastes hate sugar. Besides, we're done soft soaping. Frame them all! From spray starch to sliced salami, from calories to carbs! Then Brand X will step in and replace them all!"

As Lady X and her henchman left the top of the dryer, Dex and Dan struggled in the spinning machine below. They began to run like hamsters on a hamster wheel.

Dan was slammed into the side of the machine by a tumbling sock. The poor squirrel was melting in the heat of the dryer.

"Socks! That's it!" said Dex. "Socks always escape the dryer." Dex managed to catch a sock and kick off the contraption's center. "Got it!" he shouted as he held the sock with one hand and grabbed Dan with the other. The two friends were sucked into an exhaust vent just as the machine began a violent spin cycle they would never have survived.

"Okay, pal, you're safe now," Dex said as they both climbed out of the exhaust vent onto the roof.

Safe, Dex turn to leave.

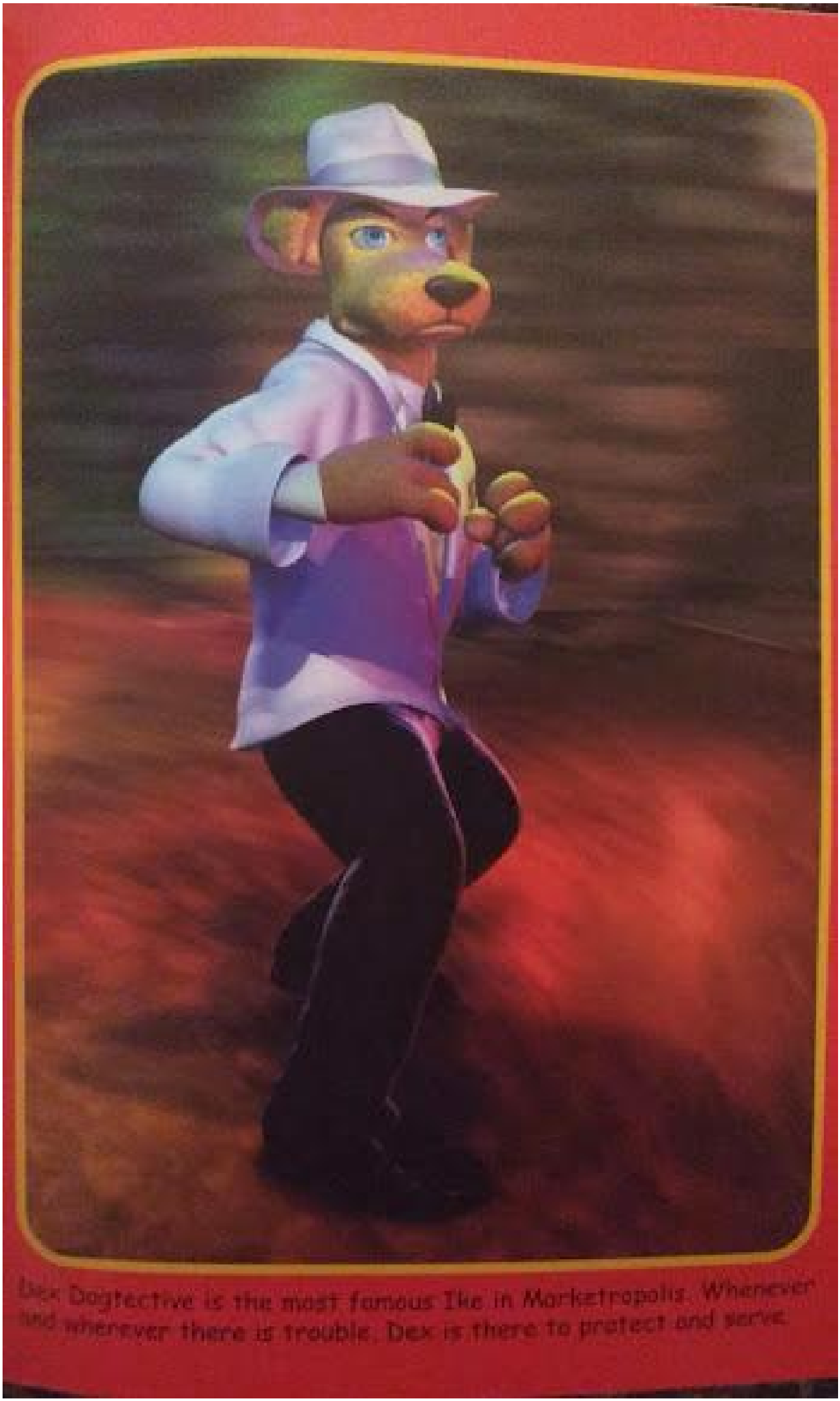
"Yo, whoa! Where you going?" Dan asked him.

"Look, Dan, I just came to find you. But that's it. I don't—"

"Yeah, yeah," Dan said, "don't get involved no more. Got it. But you might want to look at this first."

Dex stopped and looked into another air vent. "What the fudge?" he demanded as a gush of steam suddenly blasted them both in the face.

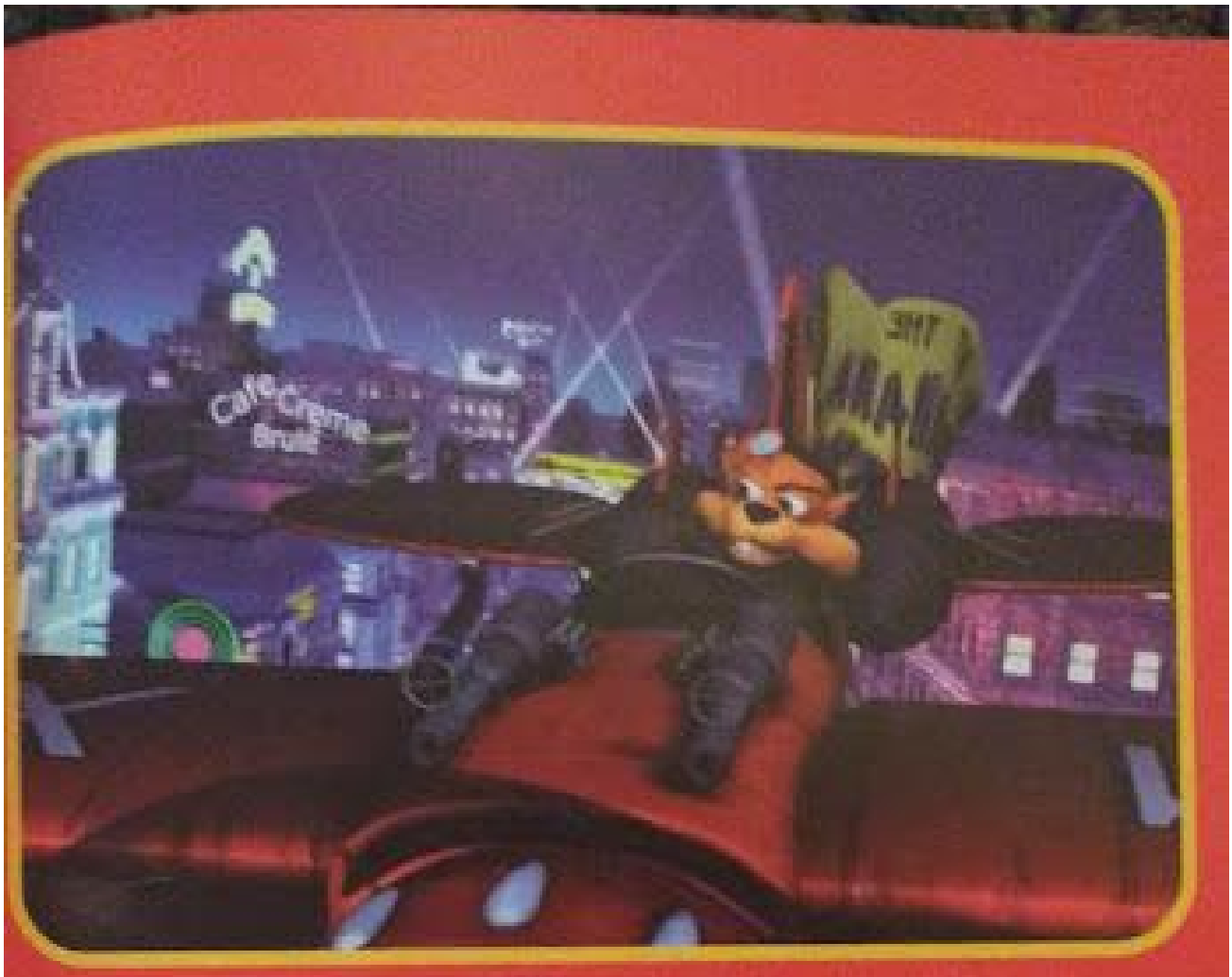
Through the vent they could see inside the



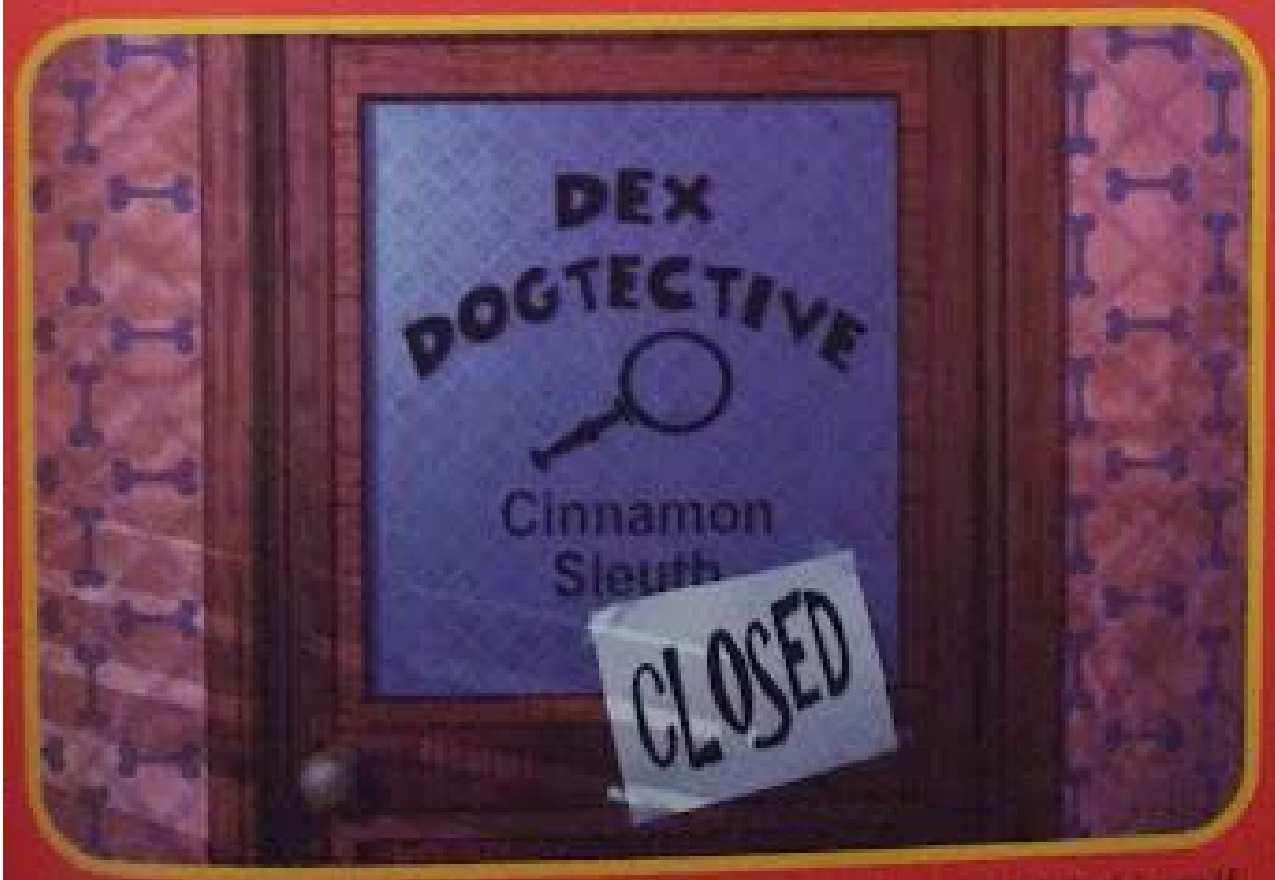
Dex: Dogtective is the most famous Ike in Marketropolis. Whenever and wherever there is trouble, Dex is there to protect and serve.

Ikes go wild when Dex gives his signature salute!

Sunshine is the girl Dex loves most.

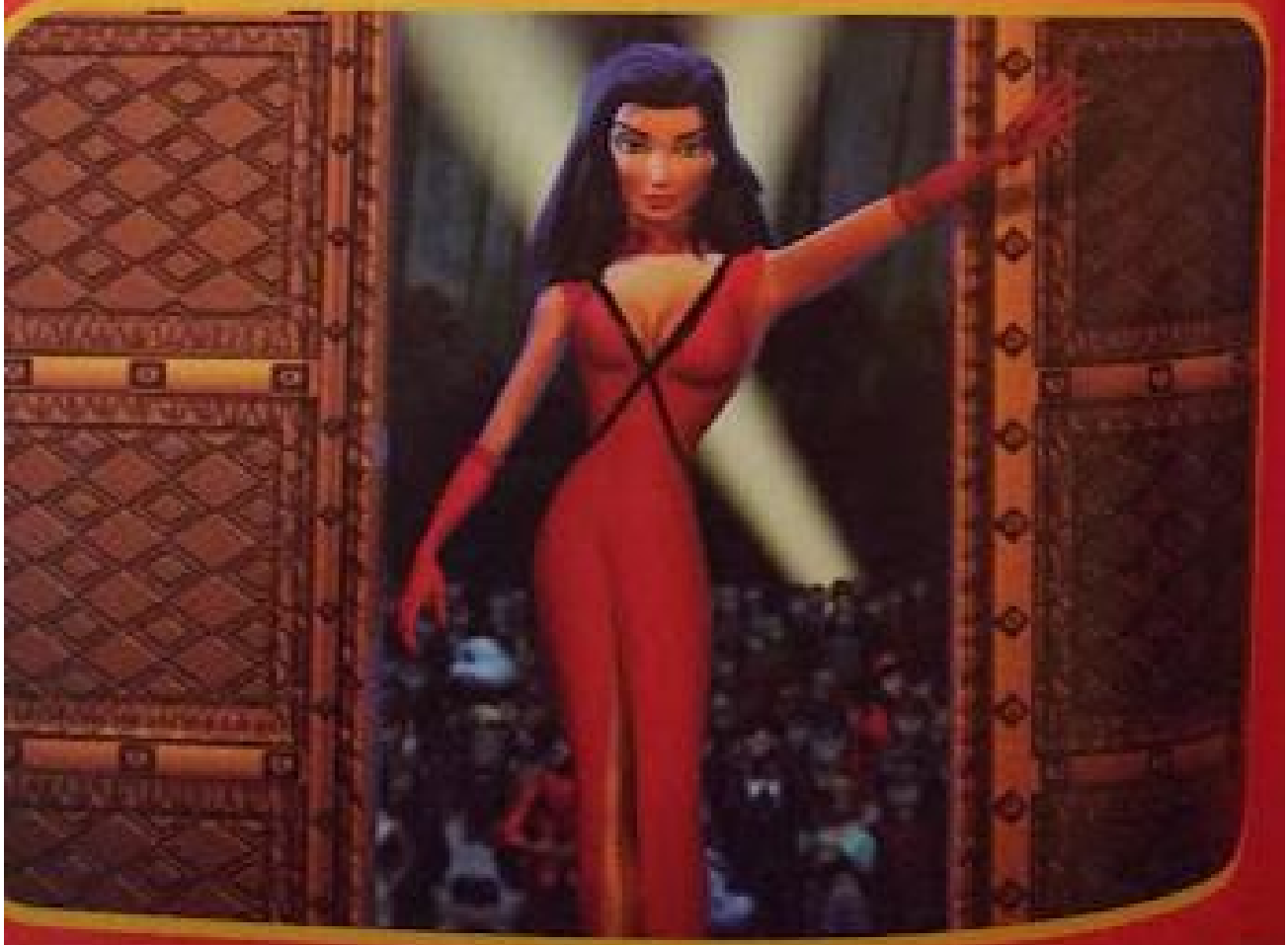


Daredevil Dan, a high-flying Ike, is Dex's best friend.



When Sunshine mysteriously disappears, Dex loses faith in himself.

Dex runs the CopaBanana, a swingin' club, to forget his trouble.



Lady X makes a big entrance at the CopaBanana.

Tiki: Taki agrees—Lady X is hot!

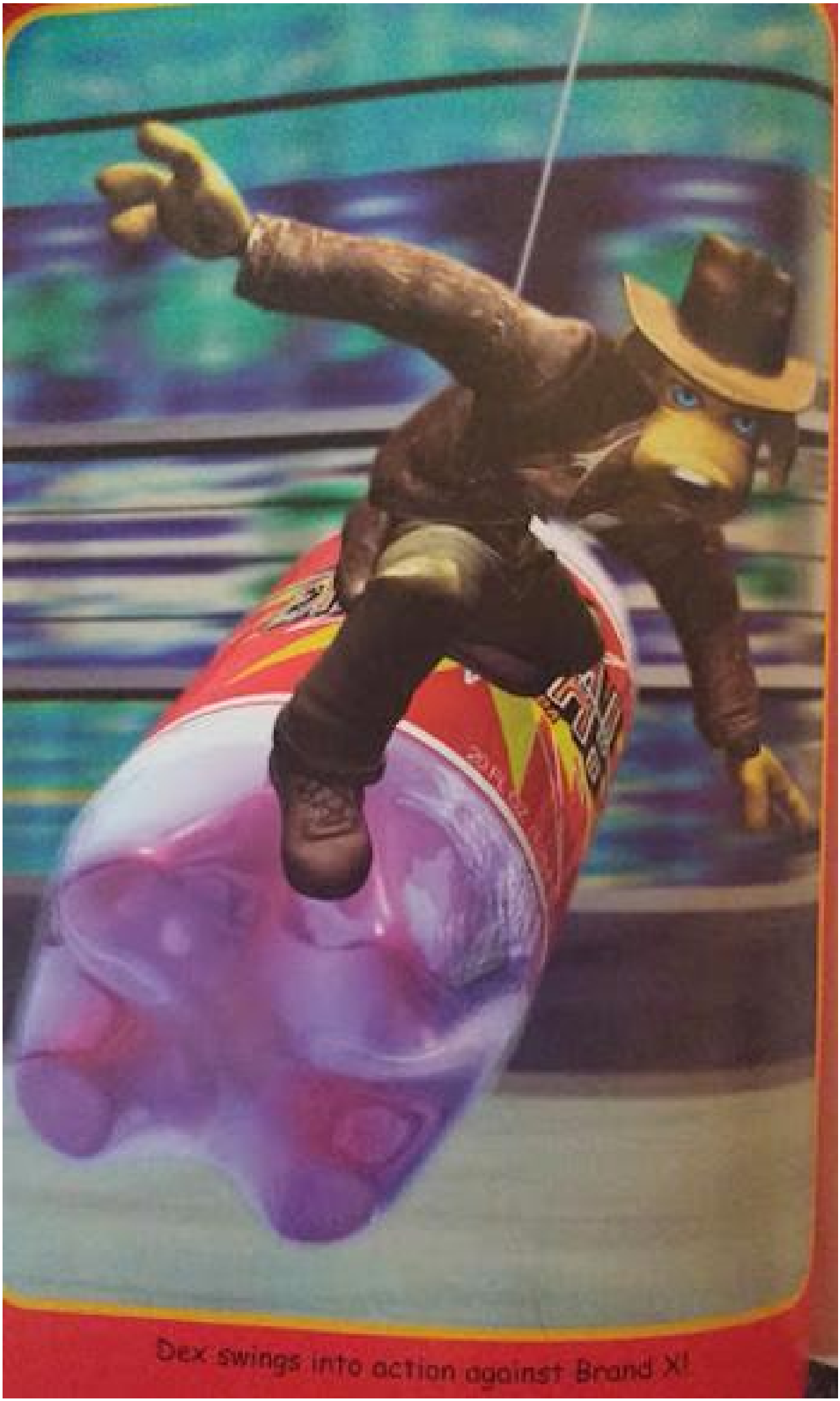
Brand X quickly takes over Marketropolis.

Lady X has a sinister plan . . .

. . . and an army of Xobytes filled with dangerous de-servo!

The good Ikes report for duty to fight the Brand X menace.

Ghoulzel the Weasel has many talents, but can he be trusted?



Dex swings into action against Brand X!

cavernous bowels of the Brand X building. There was a mechanized high-tech factory of war! Dex recognized the weapons they were making. They were the Xobytes he'd seen in Lady X's penthouse—thousands of them!

"They're building an entire army of robotic Xobytes!" Dex told Dan. As they watched, the mechanical creatures moved down a conveyer belt to have their stingers filled with black sludge. Dex whispered to Dan, "But what's that oily liquid?"

"Yo, I saw that!" Dan exclaimed. "It's the same stuff they shot into Krispy and the other Ikes when they rubbed 'em out!"

Suddenly, over the loudspeaker, Lieutenant X announced, "Attention all icons. Curfew is now in effect. Only Brand X officials are permitted in the aisles. All violators will be punished."

Dex and Dan exchanged looks. Lady X's evil plot was clear. "They must be planning to finish what they started last night," Dex said. "Brand X is going to take over the entire store!"

"Come on. Let's get 'em," Dan said, ready to charge. "I ain't afraid!"

"Well, I am," Dex said, stopping his friend.

Dan was stunned. "You are? Really? Big-time afraid or little afraid?"

"Can't you see, Dan? I let Sunshine down and I lost her, and now I'm afraid of letting everybody else down and of losing them, and you, too."

"Oh, now ya done it," Dan said as he sniffled and wiped away a tear. "Nothing worse than mushy chocolate. C'mon, man, every Ike in this store needs you. They believe in you."

"You don't understand," Dex sighed. "I just don't know if I can cut the mustard anymore."

Dan wasn't about to let the great Dogtective give up. "You gotta believe in yourself; you have to dare the day again," he said. "If Sunshine were here, she would."

Dex took a deep breath. Dan was right. Sunshine would have believed that he could save the market. She would have believed that he could save the whole world, if it needed saving, and that he would go for it, giving it everything he had. "You know," Dex said, shaking his head, "I do have an idea!"

Dan gave his friend a huge bucktoothed grin.

"Now, that's more like it! Dex Dogtective is back!"

"But," Dex warned him, "it's really, really, really dangerous."

The squirrel paused. "How come you said 'really' three times? I haven't ever heard you do that. Not that I'm scared or nothin'."

Dex put his arm around Dan's shoulder. "C'mon, pal," he said, smiling. "Let's get outta here."

Dan and Dex made their way through Marketropolis to the usually quiet toiletries aisle. They spotted a line of Brand X soldiers marching by. *Probably out enforcing Lady X's curfew,* Dex thought. How convenient to have every Ike in town locked down for the night. Brand X could knock off the Ikes one by one with no witnesses.

Dex and Dan ducked into Dr. Nustrix's office. Nustrix was a nasal spray Ike with knowledge of every ingredient of every product on the pharmaceutical aisle. Dan and Dex had almost made it through the door when Dan slipped and landed on the sleeping Dr. Nustrix's huge nose.

"Holy schnozola!" Nustrix yelled as he woke with a squirrel on his nose. "What's going on?"

Dex pulled the bottle of Lady X's perfume from

his pocket. "We need you to analyze this. I *borrowed* it from Lady X. I think it's the secret ingredient in the Brand X Elixir."

"Brand X! Why me?" Dr. Nustrix asked in a panic. He had learned to keep his nose out of other people's business. "I'm just a nose doctor. I can't—"

Before he could finish, Dex slapped him. "Snap out of it, Doc. You're the only one with a nose for the job," Dex told him.

Dr. Nustrix reluctantly agreed to help. "Okay," he said, letting out a huge sneeze that soaked Dan and Dex. "I'll give it a whiff."

A short time later, in Dr. Nustrix's lab, Dan and Dex watched the Elixir go into the doctor's Olfactometer. The machine chugged and burped. "The analysis is nearly complete," Dr. Nustrix told them.

Dan started fidgeting with bubbling vials and beakers as they waited.

The doctor slapped Dan's hand as he read the results from the machine. "That's odd. My Olfactometer can't fully identify the main

ingredient," the doctor said. "This I can tell you, though—the Brand X Elixir is toxic to humans and highly addictive."

"Addictive," Dex said, nodding. "Okay, so that explains why customers are buying up Brand X products like crazy."

Dan picked up the bottle of Elixir and took a sniff. The squirrel's eyes sparkled as he looked at Dr. Nustrix. "Have I mentioned you look fabulous in that lab coat?" Dan asked dreamily.

Dex and Dr. Nustrix took a step away from the Elixir-addled squirrel at the same time. "We have to find a way to protect the humans," Dex said, trying to focus on the big picture.

"And us!" Dr. Nustrix cried. "How can we regular icons compete against this irresistible Elixir?"

Dex shook his head. He could see that it was almost sunrise. "We can't," he said. "It won't be long before the whole store will be—"

Dr. Nustrix gasped as he suddenly realized what was going to happen. "The rest of us discontinued!" he shouted.

Dan kept fiddling with the beakers.

"If we could just get this info to our market's corporate headquarters," Dex said, "they'd have to recall Brand X."

"Impossible," Dr. Nustrix said. "Their offices are outside the store, miles away from here. How could you possibly reach them?"

Dex snapped his fingers. "E-mail!" he said. "From Mr. Leonard's computer!"

"But it's in the Expiration Station, at the other end of the store. You'd never make it there before the market opens," Dr. Nustrix said, checking his watch.

"Then we cross during the day," Dex said.

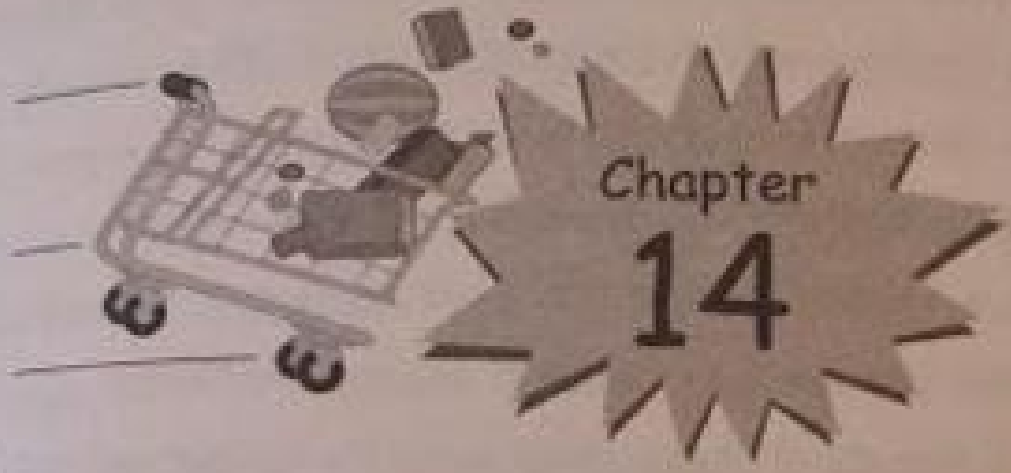
Dan suddenly looked up. "Daytime!" he exclaimed. "No one has *ever* done that."

He knocked over a few sizzling beakers as he said, "Yo, have you flipped your flapjacks? What about all those humans out there, the ones with the big huge feet, that are never, *ever* supposed to squash—I mean, see—us Ikes? Not that I can't handle it. Because I can."

Dex knew how dangerous it would be, but he also knew what would happen if they didn't

try. "We won't survive another night against Brand X. It's our only shot."

Nervous, Dr. Nustrix was happy to see them go. He was ready to get in bed, pull the covers over his big nose, and forget the whole thing when one of Dan's mixtures caught fire and blew up his whole lab. The doctor looked at the mess, then sighed, his narrow shoulders slumping.



Moving fast and staying low, Dex and Dan headed across the rooftops of Marketropolis. All at once, sunlight filled the aisles, and the city instantly turned into a supermarket.

Many of the market's shelves were filled with drab, gray Brand X products instead of the brightly colored brand-name packages. Dex shook his head. "I can't believe I let it get this far."

"Brand X is spreading like moldy cheese," Dan said. "How are we ever gonna stop 'em in time?"

The first customers of the day charged into the store. Behind them was the tall, thin Brand X representative carrying his clipboard. His men were delivering more pallets of Brand X products, all with Elixir.

Dex had seen enough. "We must have lost

hundreds of Ikes last night. C'mon, pal, let's get going before we lose any more." The two looked down into the aisles, where shopping carts were zooming toward the new Brand X displays.

Dan looked at the traffic. "How are we supposed to cross ten aisles of that?" he asked Dex.

"If the next thing you hear is 'Cleanup on aisle one,'" Dex answered, "you know we blew it."

Suddenly, Brand X's Mashed Potato Man jumped in front of them. He cracked his knuckles. "Not take that long," he grunted with a thick Austrian accent. "I mash your potatoes now."

Dan took a step toward the brute. "Oh, I get it; you're the Brand X Mashed Potato Man. Oh, yeah, that's clever. Well, my friend Dex is gonna get creative on your—"

"Are you crazy?" Dex cried. "He's huge!"

Brand X soldiers were moving down the shelves.

"Let's get the strawberry jam outta here!" Dex shouted as the two began to run.

The lumpy Mashed Potato Man quickly slung a pudding lid at them. Dex yanked Dan out of the way as the disk whizzed by their heads. The potato man

and the Brand X soldiers were too close for Dex's taste. He dove off the shelf, pulling Dan along with him.

Dan dropped into the lap of a surprised toddler sitting in a shopping cart. The child was about to take Dan into his sticky fingers when his mother snatched the horrified chocolate squirrel away.

"No!" she said as she tossed Dan back toward the shelf. "I am not buying that for you."

But Dan missed the shelf and plummeted to the floor, screaming. A large shoe was about to trample him into chocolate chips when Dex lunged and pulled him onto a cart. "That was close," Dex said, relieved.

As shoppers continued to race for the Brand X products on display, Dex and Dan bounced along in the cart's undercarriage, just inches from the wheels.

"What do you mean, 'was'?" Dan cried as the Mashed Potato Man zoomed toward them on the undercarriage of another cart.

"Miss me?" the crazed Mashed Potato Man shouted, brandishing a potato masher over his head.

Sparks flew as the two carts collided. A third cart,

carrying General X and Lieutenant X, moved in from the other side. Dex and Dan were surrounded.

The Mashed Potato Man leaped from his cart, landed in front of Dan, and began chasing the terrified squirrel in circles.

Dex jumped wildly into the dairy section and tossed a stick of butter to Dan. "Okay, butter his buns!" Dex yelled.

The evil Brand X Mashed Potato Man had almost cornered Dan when the squirrel swung the stick of butter with all his might. The potato man grinned and swallowed the whole greasy stick in one gulp. "Butter go good with potatoes," the ugly man said, smiling at Dan. "You like me!"

Dan rolled his eyes. "No, I don't like you, you salmonella-smellin' mush-faced moron!"

Dan immediately regretted his words. "You hurt Mashed Potato Man's feelings," the huge creature whined. "Now I hurt *you*!"

The Mashed Potato Man raised his masher. Above them, suspended by a cable attached to his belt, Dex swung down, riding a bottle of soda. He yanked Dan onto the bottle as the Mashed Potato

Man swung his masher at Dan. The Mashed Potato Man missed and hit the bottle cap instead.

Dan cheered as the fizz from the bottle zoomed them straight up.

"DARE THE DAY," Dan yelled down at the angry potato man, "and . . . MAYDAY! MAYDAY!"

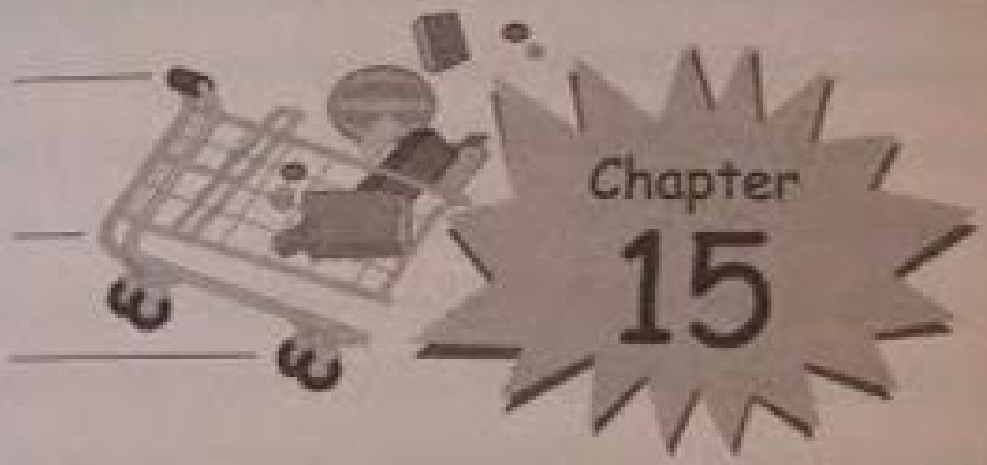
Dan screamed as the green bottle began to lose altitude. They were plummeting, heading toward the frozen food section. Dex and Dan braced themselves. The glass door of the ice cream freezer was coming at them fast.

They were about to hit the door when a customer's hand reached for the handle and opened it. The green bottle whooshed inside, and Dex and Dan felt the icy cold surround them as they crashed into a tub of Polar Pleasure ice cream.

Dex found himself lying alone in the snow next to a towering ice cream cone tree. "Dan!" he called out. "Are you okay, Dan?"

A second later, Dan crashed to the base of the tree. Sporting a pine bough on his head, he answered, dazed, "I'm cool. I'm good."

"Nice hat," Dex said, trying not to smirk at his friend.



At that moment, on the toothpaste aisle, Lady X and her minions were busy carrying out their plan to rub out all the store's Ikes. They had Twinkleton, a large elephant Ike from a popular toothpaste, crammed into a dentist's chair.

"What's going on?" the terrified elephant asked.

"We have reports that you're plotting against sugars!" Lieutenant X told him as he focused a glaring light into the elephant's eyes.

"Me? I don't even have fluoride!" Twinkleton cried. "I'm just a whitener!"

Lady X stepped in front of the lieutenant, a drill screaming in her hand. She moved the light closer to the poor elephant and leaned over him.

Twinkleton began to scream. . . .

* * *

Back in the freezer case, Lady X's henchmen, patrolling on snowmobiles, spotted Dex and Dan.

Dan sprang to his feet and knocked the tree branch off his head. The Brand X snowmobiles were zooming toward them. Dex and Dan suddenly heard a giant kaboom above them. More Brand X soldiers were setting off explosives on a nearby mountain. It began to shake and rumble.

An avalanche was careering toward them when Polar Penguin pulled up on his toboggan. "You fellath need a lift?" he said merrily.

Dan quickly pushed the little penguin aside. "I'll drive."

"Can you handle one of these?" Dex asked.

"As well as I can fly a plane."

"That's what I was afraid of," Dex answered, and hung on for dear life.

Dan zipped through tunnels of ice and over huge jumps. Dex shouted to the little penguin, "Polar, you need to warn the other Ikes; Brand X is behind the rubouts."

Before Polar Penguin could answer, a Brand X snowmobile closed in on them.

Dan looked over his shoulder and grinned. "I'll lose 'em with the—"

"Not the loop-the-loop!" Dex shouted as Dan took the toboggan up a snowbank. "DARE THE DAY!" Dan yelled as it rocketed into the air and Polar Penguin jumped from the out-of-control toboggan.

"What did I say?" Dex yelled.

Dex, Dan, and the toboggan flew out of the freezer, toward the other side of the aisle.

"Bring as many Ikes as you can to the 'Banana tonight! And thanks, Polar!" Dex called back to the little penguin, who was still safe in the freezer.

"That'th what friendth are for!" the penguin said with a salute.

As Dex and Dan sailed through the air, they heard the store's loudspeaker announce, "The store is now closed."

Mr. Leonard was walking out the steel doors of the Expiration Station. Dan knew that Dex thought they'd get some answers if they could just get inside.

"We ain't gonna make it," Dan told him as he held on tightly to the toboggan.

"Yes, we are!" Dex said into the wind.

"No way!" Dan said, closing his eyes.

"We will!" Dex promised as they shot between Mr. Leonard's feet at breakneck speed. They made it through the steel doors just before they slammed shut.

The toboggan crashed to a stop at the base of a computer desk.

"I told you we'd make it!" Dan cried.

But Dex wasn't paying attention to him. He was staring at all the rubbed-out Ikes. The place was filled with the oozing, mangled products that had been done in by Brand X: Roman Pepperoni, Vlad Chokool, Kung Tofu, and so many others.

Dan took in the carnage. He shook his head in sorrow and disbelief.

"You can't blame yourself. It's the—" Dex said as a dark shadow suddenly fell over them.

"Xobyte!"

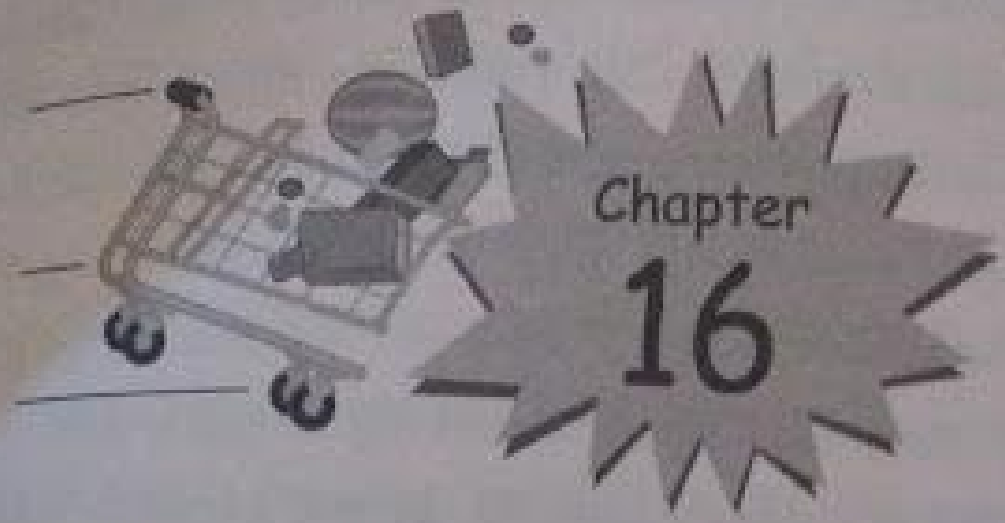
Dan hit the deck, but Dex rolled and came up with both price tag guns ready to blaze.

"Do not shoot! It is I, the Chocolate Pudding Vampire, at your service!"

The Ike glided down on his large bat wings and landed next to them. He leaned over and sniffed Dan. "Is that the enticing scent of rich, creamy chocolate I detect?"

Dan scurried behind Dex. "You're lookin' pretty good for *biting* it," Dex said, putting down his guns.

Vlad lifted his cape and showed them the Xobyte stinger mark on his rump. "Oh, they poisoned me like the other Ikes. But vhat can I say? I am the undead."



As Mr. Leonard pulled away from his beloved market that night, the only light coming from it was as gray as the Brand X boxes that filled his store.

Roving searchlights began scanning the aisles. "Mandatory security rally tonight. All icons must attend or face the penalty of elimination," a voice blared over the intercom for the few terrified Ikes who remained.

Outside the Expiration Station, Brand X soldiers were gathering in force.

"You, seal this door! And find the fuse box!" General X ordered one group of soldiers.

Inside, Vlad, Dex, and Dan worked frantically at the computer's keyboard. A little blue icon appeared on the monitor. "How can I help? Upload? Download? Scan?" the icon asked.

"Blue," Dex said, "we're going to get Corporate to recall Brand X. Can you bring up a form?"

Suddenly, they heard a spurting sound outside the station's steel doors. Dex heard someone say, "This will seal their tomb!" Dex sniffed the air. "Looney glue," he said. "They're locking us in!"

Dan panicked, looking at the expired Ikes and then at Vlad. "In here . . . with them? And HIM?"

Dan raised his fingers in the sign of a cross.

"Let's just call it cozy," Vlad said, raising an eyebrow.

"I'll work with Blue," Dex said to Vlad and Dan. "You fly around and check for loose vent grates."

The vampire took off with Dan on his back and smacked into the wall beneath a vent. "Oh, yeah, good plan," Dan said.

"You know, if you would let me lead . . . ," Vlad answered as the two took off and careened around the room.

Dex focused on the computer screen. "Scanning forms. Only two recalls on file," the blue icon said.

The first file opened, and Dex was suddenly looking into the incredibly wrinkled face of Priscilla

Pussly. *"Priscilla Pussly's Genetically Gigantic Prunes."* Dex said, surprised and a little disgusted.

"What kind of fool needs a bigger prune?" Dan asked as he and Vlad made a low pass.

"Nobody." Dex answered. "Priscilla had the worst sales in store history."

"And here is the other recall," the blue icon said as the second folder popped up on-screen. Dex couldn't have been more surprised. It was a processing form recalling the Sunshine Goodness label!

"Sunshine recalled?" Dex asked in shock. "Who ordered it?"

"No name," the blue icon reported. "Address only. Same location as Priscilla Pussly's recall."

"That's impossible," Dex said. "Sunshine and Priscilla had different manufacturers. Blue, run a search on that address against all the manufacturers on file."

Dex waited for a moment. The screen was then filled with BRAND X INDUSTRIES!

"Brand X ordered both the recalls," Dex said to himself.

Vlad and Dan flew past the screen again, this

time upside down. "I don't get it," Dan said, then let out an *"Ooof!"* as they crashed into an air-vent cover, knocking it to the ground.

Dex was fuming, gritting his teeth. "Brand X took my Sunshine away!"

"Easy, bro," Dan said. "I know how you feel."

"No," Dex said with fire in his eyes. "No one can. Not even you."

"Okay, but ya gotta stay focused, or Brand X's gonna take everything else you love, too."

"Not while I'm still breathing," Dex said, suddenly determined. He typed a new command on the computer keyboard. "We have to send the form to recall all of Brand X's products." Before Dex's eyes, a blank form immediately appeared on the screen.

Outside the Expiration Station, two Brand X soldiers were shooting twine at the fuse box. "We are pulling the plug on these traitors!" Lieutenant X exclaimed as the twine looped around the fuse marked STORAGE ROOM. They pulled and tugged the twine in unison.

Inside the Expiration Station, Dex had his eyes

glued to the computer screen. He filled out the form to recall all Brand X products.

"Sending now," the little blue icon said. The screen flashed the words "connection in progress," then—*fttz!*—the screen went blank.

"What happened?" Vlad asked.

"Brand X must've killed the power," Dex answered.

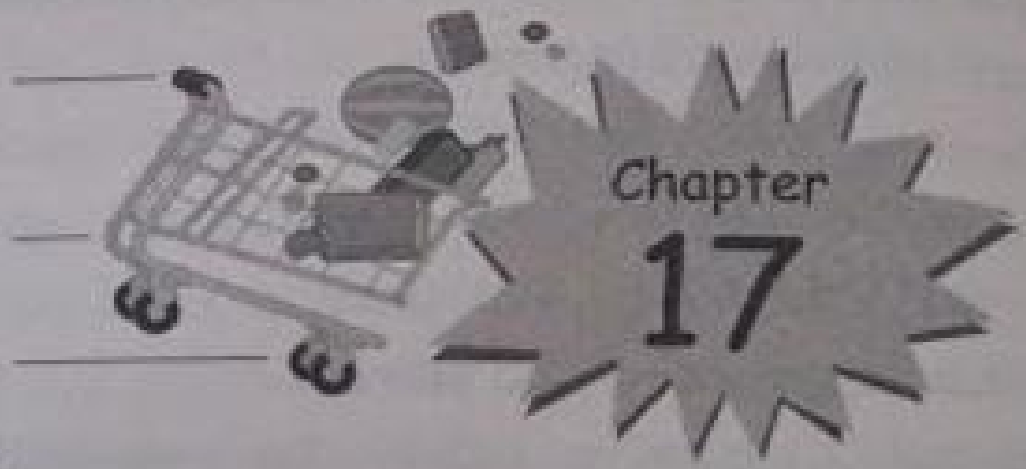
"But the e-mail went through, right?" Dan said hopefully.

"Maybe," Dex said, calculating their chances in his head. "But now we can't count on headquarters coming to save us."

"But you said we ain't gonna survive the night unless headquarters gets rid of Brand X," Dan said nervously. "So what do we do now?"

Dex knew that there was only one answer to that question. "Fight!" he said.

"C'mon!" he said to Vlad and Dan. "Let's get up to that vent and over to the CopaBanana. The egg timer's ticking."



On the balcony of the Brand X Detergent building, Lady X was addressing a crowd of nervous Ikes. General X and Lieutenant X were at her side. The crowd listened as she described life in the market's new world order. "There are only two kinds of product icons: *desirable* . . . like me . . . and *undesirable*. We must send all the undesirables where they belong: the *E*xpiration Station!"

A grim hush fell over the crowd. It was everyone's worst nightmare.

"Look around," Lady X told them. "Do you see an Ike with an inferior product? Turn in the undesirables and join Brand X for a better way of life."

Ant Acid suddenly stood and pointed at the friendly Kiwi Kola Ike. "Kiwi Koala causes

heartburn!" he yelled. Mashed Potato Man grabbed the poor koala Ike and roughly hauled him away.

"From this day forward," Lady X shouted triumphantly, "you must prove you are desirable!"

Inside the air vent, over the crowd, Dan rode on Vlad's back as Dex whipped around on the computer mouse Vlad was dragging. They could hear Lady X. "Soon we will become the model of excellence," she was saying, "until the entire world is just like us!"

Fearing that they might be singled out next, the little Ikes cheered.

"One store, one X! One world, one X!" Lady X chanted.

"ONE STORE, ONE X! ONE WORLD, ONE X!" the Ikes chanted along.

The USDA members François Fromage, Polar Penguin, Sweet Cakes, and Hairy Hold quietly shook their heads as they stood onstage with Lady X.

"You have placed us in le pickle, Hairy," François said.

"You don't understand," Hairy answered nervously. "She promised. This will all work out. It just has to!"

Lady X turned her withering gaze on Hairy. He forced a smile and joined the crowd in cheering "One store, one X! ONE WORLD, ONE X!"

At the same time, inside the CopaBanana, a tattered but determined band of Ikes calling themselves La Résistance were having their first meeting.

"Holy tamales!" Lola said when she heard the chanting led by Hairy and Lady X. "I cannot believe what those eggheads are saying out there. Let's slice 'em up like sushi." She turned to the upmarket fish Ike, who was staring at her in wide-eyed horror. "Sorry, just a figure of speech," she said with an apologetic smile.

Suddenly, François, Polar, and Sweet Cakes rushed in, shouting, "We wish to join La Résistance."

"That's swell," Maximilius Moose said, "but if da boss don't get here soon—"

Before the worried bouncer could finish, ten Brand X soldiers crashed through the doors of the club. They were followed by the evil Lieutenant X. Everyone in the club went silent as he circled the room.

"Dex Dogtective has been discontinued," Lieutenant X announced. "And unless you care to suffer a long, cruel expiration, you will sing your allegiance to Brand X!"

Lieutenant X gave his soldiers a nod, and they began singing, *"Brand X, Brand X, it's simple and plain! Brand X, Brand X, it's different but all the same!"*

Only a couple of scared Ikes sang along with them. Lieutenant X stopped in front of François Fromage, who refused to sing. The Brand X soldiers surrounded him.

"We want to hear you sing. With *feeling*," Lieutenant X snarled into the frog's face.

"I'm not a Brand X icon," he answered, then proudly began to sing the USDA Ike song.

"Don't get smart, cheeseball, or I'll grate you alive," Lieutenant X snapped.

Dex burst into the club. He stared down Lieutenant X, then turned to the raisins onstage. "Play it!" he shouted. The crowd froze. Their great Dogtective hadn't been discontinued. He was just getting started!

"But, boss—" Maximilius said, looking at the menacing Brand X soldiers.

"I said, play it!"

The raisins onstage began the tune, and Dex sang, *"We are the USDA and we serve freedom every day. . . ."*

Dan came through the door behind him and joined in. *"We protect and serve ourselves, our goods sit proudly on the shelves. . . ."*

The Brand X soldiers sang loudly. *"Brand X, Brand X, it's simple and plain! Brand X, Brand X, it's different but all the same!"*

But every Ike in the room sang in response, *"We are the USDA and we serve freedom every day. We protect and serve ourselves, our goods sit proudly on the shelves!"*

The Brand X soldiers were completely drowned out.

"Very touching," Lieutenant X said to Dex and Dan with a sneer. "Maybe you two would care to sing it for Lady X."

"Go tell Lady X this is still my club," Dex replied as the soldiers headed for the door. "And you

and your lousy jingle aren't welcome."

"We will return," Lieutenant X threatened, waving a fist, "to pulverize you all!"

Lola threw her arms around Dex's neck and squealed for joy as the Ikes crowded around him. "I knew they couldn't discontinue you!" Lola said, planting a kiss on Dex's cheek.

"Not without a fight," Dex told the crowd. "When Lady X finds out Dan and I are still alive, she'll come after us—all of us—with everything she's got. If she can't have our store, she'll destroy it. We have only one option."

A hush went over the room. "Boss," the moose said, "youse talking about a food fight!"

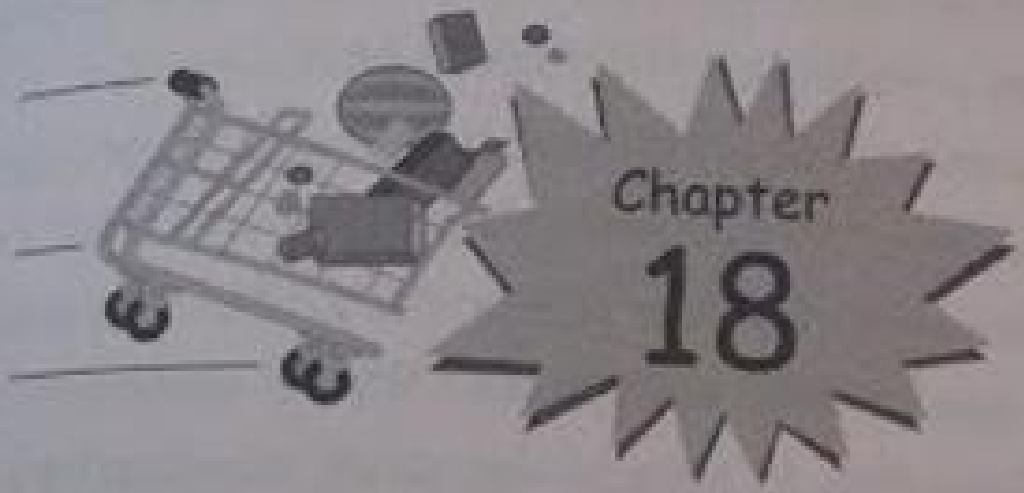
Dex knew that no one wanted war, but there was nothing left for them to do. "We've all lost someone . . . a friend, a neighbor, someone we love," Dex said, holding the worn picture of Sunshine in his hand. "But we can't fight for the way things were. We can only fight for the way things should be. Together we can stop this tyrant. Now, who's with us?"

Polar Penguin was the first to step up. "I'm with

you guyth. But could someone pleath turn up the heat?"

Maximilius Moose spoke for all the Ikes in the room. "We're with ja all the way, boss. We always have been."

Dex nodded. "Thanks. All right, then. let me show you what I've got in mind."



Across the store, Lady X was surveying her troops as they marched down the market's main aisle. Behind her, Hairy Hold, the remaining member of the USDA, was nervously pulling what was left of his hair.

"We have the Resistance cornered," Lady X said, beaming. "We will take no prisoners!"

Hundreds of Xobytes flew over the troops in attack formation.

"We will show no mercy!" she cried. "We will exterminate them all! ONE WORLD! ONE X!"

The reply came from the Brand X–filled aisles: "NO DAN! NO DEX!"

Inside the CopaBanana, Dex unrolled a map. "So we'll need all the aluminum foil and trash bags in the

store," he told the Ikes. "And that, my friends, is one-stop shopping. Any more questions?"

"Yeah, what about those flying slice 'n' dicers?" Dan asked. "How do we stop those suckers?"

Dex looked at his fellow Ikes. "I'm not going to sell you a bill of goods. We're out-armed and out-Iked. But as long as we work together, we have a chance."

Suddenly, François yelled, "Les Brand X comes! Les Brand X comes!"

The troops were advancing fast. "This is it," Dex told the Ikes. "We stop Brand X here tonight or it's this store, then another, till they spread like mold around the world. We have to defend ourselves and people everywhere."

The Resistance cheered!

Using a pair of high-powered binoculars on her balcony, Lady X spotted Dex. "I have the dirty dog," she said. "Produce!"

From the roof of the produce section, Dex saw Lady X through his telescope. "Come and get me, baby," he said with a grin.

Lady X called to her general through his headset. "Attack and annihilate! He's on the roof! *Get him!*"

Dex ran along the roofline and jumped to another building at the end of an alley.

General X led his troops into the alley. They threw grappling hooks up onto the roof where Dex was standing.

Dex closed his eyes. Still holding the picture of Sunshine, he yelled, "FOOD FIGHT!"

Every Ike suddenly appeared on the rooftop. General X looked up. "It's a trick!" he cried, but it was too late.

Vats of hot chocolate rained down on the climbing Brand X soldiers, washing them from their grappling lines.

Dex raised his fist, and another line of Ikes began hurling fruits and vegetables at the troops.

"RETREAT!" General X shouted, and the remaining troops ran for the opening of the alley. But they screeched to a stop when they found it blocked by François Fromage. He was standing in front of a chain of linked sausage, and he meant business.

Cream pies were loaded onto spatulas that

balanced on the sausage links, and with a wave of Fromage's hand, row after row of pies was launched at General X and his men.

"Cream them!" Dex shouted from the rooftop.

From her balcony, Lady X watched. She was surprisingly calm. "All right, Dogtective, now your master must punish you."

She spoke into her headset, ordering the Mashed Potato Man to join the battle.

"WHIP THEM!" she called out to him. "WHIP THEM *BAD*!"

The Ikes cheered as General X and his troop retreated in all directions. They felt like brand-name heroes until the Mashed Potato Man turned the corner. He was leading fifteen thousand Brand X soldiers armed with cans of whipped cream. They sprayed the Ikes, pushing them back in a wave of foam.

Brand X tanks of ketchup appeared, with giant hands banging on the bottles. Blasts of ketchup flew into the air. They mixed with the whipped cream and sent the nauseated Ikes running in chaos.

Lady X smiled from her balcony. But she wasn't through with these pitiful Ikes yet. She raised a hand, and a swarm of Xobytes took to the air. They attacked the fleeing Ikes, who dove for cover. "I'm exquisite," she said with a laugh.

Dex saw the swarm attack. He jumped onto another rooftop and signaled every flying Ike in the market. Vlad, Dan, and an army of other brave Ikes were ready.

"Okay, everyone," Dex shouted, giving them a thumbs-up, "let's gum up their works!" They all shoved bubble gum into their mouths and took to the sky.

In his XJ-1 jet, Dan chewed frantically. "Just be cool," he said to himself. "They're nothing but overgrown mosquitoes . . . with gigantic, deadly stingers . . . that want to kill me!"

Terrified, Dan drew the buzzing Xobytes into a wild air chase, leading them right into a pack of flying Ikes. The chewing Ikes blew enormous pink bubbles and released them into the air. It was like an aerial minefield! The Xobytes hit the bubbles with a splat, gumming up their wings and spiraling to the ground.

Below them, General X was loading a line of catapults with zucchini. "SQUASH THEM ALL!" Lady X shouted angrily. With a wave of the general's arm, the zucchini was fired. Polar Penguin was about to be flattened when Dex pulled him clear.

"Head for the 'Banana!" Dex yelled to the Ikes behind him.

Lady X watched through her binoculars. She held up a spiked dog collar. "Run while you can, Dex Dogtective. . . . Soon I'll have you sitting up and begging for mercy!"

Chapter 19

Dex rushed through the doors of the CopaBanana and slammed right into Maximilius. "Maximilius!" Dex shouted. "Phase Two—*go!*"

The large moose was trying to push his bottom through a small drain grate. "Maybe I shouldn't oughta eaten that last donut," he said to himself, grunting.

A figure slinked from the shadows. "Amateurs." Cheazel sneered. "It would appear that you are in need of a professional."

"How do we know you're not with Brand X?" Dex asked him.

The weasel framed his face with his fingers. "According to the lady," he said, "I am the poster boy for undesirable products."

Maximilius looked at Dex. "You knows, boss, we

could fights fire with fire," the moose said.

"More like filth with sleaze," Dex said.

"I much prefer 'evil with charm,'" Cheazel suggested as a compromise, "but perhaps now is not the time to quibble over semantics."

Dex nodded. "Welcome to the war, Weasel."

Cheazel slipped a pair of goggles on. "It's a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done before," he was saying dramatically when Maximilius kicked him in the butt, sending him down the drain.

"Ingrate!" the weasel called back.

All over Marketropolis, Ikes were busy carrying out Phase Two. They built lightning rods out of aluminum foil and attached them to structures big and small. Then they waited for Dex's signal.

Inside the Brand X building, Hairy Hold spoke to Lady X. "This can't be happening!" he said. "You lied to me!"

Lady X turned to the balding Ike. "Lied to you? That's not true. I did no more than you let me do. You handed me this store on a party platter."

Lieutenant X burst through the doors. He was

dragging Lord Flushington Frog by the neck. "He knows their plan but refuses to tell."

Lady X motioned to the lieutenant, who forced Flushington's mouth open and pulled out his long tongue. Lady X picked up a knife. "Then he won't talk to anyone," she said, lunging toward the helpless frog, "ever again."

Hairy defiantly grabbed Lady X's arm. "Enough!" he hollered.

Lady X turned on him like a viper. "Careful, Hairy," she said, "if you value what little hair you have left!"

Hairy threw his USDA badge to the floor. He knew that the badge meant nothing as long as Brand X was in control. "What's the point of luxurious locks if you can't look at yourself in the mirror?"

Lady X crushed the badge under her heel as Hairy took Flushington to his side and ran. Lieutenant X began to follow, but Lady X held him back.

"Let him go!" she said as another swarm of Xobytes took off into the air. "He'll be wiped out like the rest of them!"

The war raged on in the produce section. Polar Penguin was trying to fend off a menacing group of Xobytes with a can of bug spray. Dex rushed in to help him when the brave little penguin was stung in the back.

"*No!*" Dex shouted as the penguin collapsed and the Xobytes flew off. Dex suddenly heard the sound of cruel laughter. He looked up. General X was smiling.

"Another pathetic Ike bites the dust," General X sneered. Dex drew both of his price tag guns and covered the general in stickers, driving him back.

Dex picked up Polar's limp body. He looked up at the gray Brand X building. "I'm coming for you, Lady," he promised.

From her balcony, Lady X surveyed the damage.

"Roll over, Dogtective," she said. "You're *mine*!"

Inside the CopaBanana, Lola and Sweet Cakes were tending to the wounded. The stretchers were coming in fast. François Fromage raised a fist and bravely cried, *"Vive la Résistance!"* before he expired.

Lola placed a piece of cheesecloth over his body. "Adios, my brave cheese poof Ike," she said sadly.

Dex rushed through the door. "Hang in there, Polar," he said, laying the expiring penguin on a table.

"If you're ever in that big freether in the sky," Polar said, gasping, "you got a friend, Dex."

Polar closed his eyes. An ugly layer of frost suddenly covered his body. He'd expired. Dex turned away as Maximilius laid a tissue over the body.

"Use the whole box," Dex told the moose. "Polar would have liked it that way."

"Dex! Dex!" a voice yelled. Dex looked up. It was Dr. Nustrix. "I ran tests on the poison liquid the Xobytes are stinging our Ikes with."

"Good work, Doc," Dex said. "So what is it?"

"A *de*-servative. Imagine the chemical opposite

of a preservative. One dose causes a victim to spoil, in its own unique way: a cookie crumbles, ice cream gets freezer burn—"

"I get the picture," Dex said, surrounded by expired Ikes. "We need an antidote. Fast!"

"Ham it, Dex! I'm a nose doctor, not a miracle worker!" Dr. Nustrix said.

Vlad suddenly rushed over. He'd been monitoring their plan's progress. "The lightning rods are in place!" he shouted.

Dex nodded, and said, "Now Phase Two is up to Cheazel the Weasel."

Vlad saluted and rushed out. He bumped into Dan, who was stumbling through the door. The chocolate squirrel was war-torn and weary. Dex helped him to a chair by the window. "Easy, Dan," he said.

Dan shook his head. "Phase Two ain't gonna work," he said to Dex. "Not with all them Xobytes swarming us. There's just too many of 'em."

Using his telescope, Dex looked out the window. "They're refueling their poison inside the Brand X building. Can you fly me over Lady X's aisle?"

"Sure. No prob. 'Cept I don't have a *death wish*!" Dan muttered as he wearily followed Dex out the door.

The street was still a smoking battlefield. "If I can cut off their poison supply, maybe we can turn this thing around," Dex said as a can of whipped cream exploded close by. They ducked into a foxhole.

"Suppose you make it in. There's no way you'll get out. It's suicide!" Dan cried.

Dex and Dan covered their heads as another explosion rocked the street. "Like Sunshine always used to say, 'When in doubt, just do the right thing and it'll always turn out.'"

"Yeah," Dan answered, "but I don't want to lose you, too."

Dex smiled through the grit and smoke. "Hey, pal, you're the one who convinced me to get back in the game and dare the day. You never stopped believing in me, even when I stopped believing in myself."

"That's cuz you the best," Dan said. "But if you go in there, you ain't coming out. Don't do it, Dex.

You should be here with us."

Dex nodded. "I should have been with you the whole time, but after Sunshine vanished, I just gave up. I let you all down."

Dex looked out over the war zone. "I know now that my problems are just a hill of coffee beans compared to our store, our world." He looked at Dan, put a hand on his shoulder, and said, "Our family. If I don't make it back, I'm counting on you to take my place, pal."

"Me? But—"

"You can do it, Dan. I believe in you."

"This place won't be the same without you," Dan said, choking up. "I won't be."

Dex pointed at his heart. "The secret's inside, old buddy," he said bravely. "You'll be just fine."

He grinned at the chocolate squirrel. "So am I flying, or am I walking?"

Dan grinned back. "Let's win this sucker!" he said, slapping on his aviator goggles.

In a dark corner of the dingy discount aisle, Cheazel the Weasel raised his furry head from a manhole. The weasel was behind enemy lines, and he crept along a wall, dragging a heavy ax. He spied a thick cable that ran up a telephone pole to a red box marked POWER. With one powerful stroke, he hit the cable with the ax. The power lines fell to the ground, and electrical sparks started dancing wildly around.

Unfortunately for Cheazel, he had cut the cable *and* the telephone pole, too! The pole tilted and began to fall. The weasel looked up sadly and dropped the ax.

"Disaster—she is a loyal mistress to me," he said wearily.

Mashed Potato Man suddenly appeared out of the shadows and picked up the ax. "You got mistress?"

he grunted with his thick accent. "I want mistress!"

Cheazel quickly ducked between Mashed Potato Man's legs and kicked him from behind. Mashed Potato Man was now standing under the falling pole. "Allow me to introduce you to her," Cheazel said as the telephone pole crushed the Mashed Potato Man. Cheazel removed a pitcher of water from his coat and poured it over the Mashed Potato Man. The electric wires began to sizzle, and Cheazel took a deep, satisfying breath. "French fries . . . my favorite," he said, pleased to be the victor for once.

At the same time, Dex and Dan were flying over the Brand X building. Using a plastic bag, Dex parachuted out of the plane.

Outside the CopaBanana, Maximilius Moose gave the signal to Lord Flushington on top of the sewer cover.

Lord Flushington jumped into the sewer, and as if it were a backed-up toilet, water started to come out of it. The water traveled across the floor to the out-of-control power lines.

As soon as the water and power got together, they

caused a massive arcing, and a lightning storm began to dance all over the city. But all the Ikes' buildings were safely protected with the lightning rods. Brand X's building, however, wasn't protected, and the lightning started to burn massive holes in its cheap cardboard siding.

Flushington hopped out of the sewer and landed beside Maximilius. "Dex is a genius! These buildings were not made to withstand lightning," Flushington said excitedly.

"Guess diss is whatcha call da royal flush," the moose said, smiling.

Inside the Brand X war room, a squadron of Xobytes were refueling with nasty de-servative. They greedily sucked the stuff from a huge iron vat.

Dex hid behind a crate, then yanked on a line he'd looped around the vat. The black ooze spilled all over the Xobytes. It short-circuited them in a shower of sparks.

Dex ran as the ooze spread over the floor. He saw Lady X on her balcony. She was rushing away.

pushing a bound Ike in a laundry hamper. Dex got a look at the Ike.

"Sunshine!" Dex said, stunned.

Lady X looked down and smiled. "You dared to defy me. Worse, you rejected me. ME! I mean, look at me!"

Dex started running. "I'll save you, Sunshine!"

Lady X kept moving. "Bad, bad dog! Now you're going to pay with *her* life."

"Not this time, you demented dirtbag!" Dex yelled with fire in his eyes. He saw Lady X wheel the hamper through an unmarked door.

Dex raced through the door and found Lieutenant X standing over Sunshine with a turkey baster in his hand. Sunshine was tied and gagged, her sunshine goodness still radiating from her beautiful face.

"Sunshine!" Dex shouted when he saw that the baster was filled with black de-servative. One drop and his Sunshine would expire!

"Hold it right there or blondie gets it!" Lieutenant X growled.

Dex froze, and Lady X stepped from the shadows. "On your knees, dog!" she said.

Dex angrily dropped to his knees. The building began to shudder as Lady X looked down at him. "I always knew you were damaged goods," she said, seething. "*Exterminate* them both! Her first," she said to Lieutenant X. "Make him watch his Sunshine fade away!"

"With pleasure," Lieutenant X said, pointing the baster at Sunshine.

Suddenly, the weakened building began to rock. It was slowly falling apart. "Okay, then," Lady X said, running for the door. "I'll just leave you to it."

Lieutenant X wasn't going to give up the fiendish pleasure of destroying Sunshine and Dex. He was about to blast Sunshine with the baster. Dex looked down and, thinking fast, yanked at the rug he was kneeling on. Lieutenant X flipped over backward. "I thought that only worked in movies!" Dex said to himself, surprised at the results. He tackled Lieutenant X and grasped at the baster.

As Sunshine watched, wide-eyed with fear, she struggled in her chair. She finally managed to free one hand and yank away the gag.

"Here, Dex!" she shouted, tossing a handful of

raisins into the air. Dex caught them all in his mouth. Sunshine smiled with pride as Dex spit them out like machine gun bullets, hitting the turkey baster with maximum force and sending it flying into the air.

Dex dove for the baster as Lieutenant X dove for Sunshine. Dex hurled the baster and hit the lieutenant with it before he could grab her. The evil lieutenant fell to the floor, limp as last week's noodle salad.

Dex rushed to Sunshine. She threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Dex, I knew you'd solve my case."

Dex held her tightly. "I'm sorry," he said, looking into her big blue eyes. "I thought you were—"

Sunshine didn't let him finish. "I'm here," she said to the great Dogtective. "We're together."

Dex closed his eyes. "My world is whole again."

"I never stopped believing in you, Dex."

Dex reached into his pocket and pulled out a faded box of raisins. "And I always kept you close to my heart," he said, showing her the label. He suddenly noticed a mark on Sunshine's radiant face.

"What've they done to you?" he asked.

Sunshine sighed. "Brand X," she said sadly, "took my essence."

"Of course!" Dex said, shocked by the evil genius of Brand X. "The perfume smell: that's why it was familiar. The secret ingredient in their Elixir—they turned your sweetness, your goodness, into something vile!"

Just then, the whole room rumbled. The floor listed to one side and Sunshine began to slide away. Dex grabbed her waist. He was about to head for the door when he saw Lady X through a gaping hole in the wall. She was making her way to the exit.

It was turning into a rout for Brand X. In the air, Vlad and his airborne compatriots outmaneuvered the oncoming squad of Xobytes, which turned tail and fled. Vlad could see that the Xobytes had no black ooze left in them. "Dex did it!" he cheered. "They're out of ammo!"

The squad of Ikes took off after the Xobytes. They attacked, blowing peas through a straw, knocking the Xobytes out of the sky!

As Dex pulled Sunshine through the hole in the Brand X building, they were suddenly rained upon with a spray of machine gun fire. Brand X Baked Beans, the kind nobody liked, were coming at them fast. And the corner of the building they were clinging to was crumbling.

"The whole thing could go any minute," Dex said, trying to shield Sunshine.

She looked into his big dog eyes. They were both about to fall into the dangerous arcs of lightning crisscrossing the aisles.

"As long as I'm with you," she said, "nothing else matters."

Suddenly, Dan's XJ-1 zoomed down, trailing a rescue ladder. The baked beans *pinged* off its wings, forcing Dan to veer away.

Dex looked up and spotted the sniper, then took him out with his price tag gun. He looked up at Dan's plane. "Only one way he can make it back in time," Dex said to Sunshine. She knew he was right.

Inside his XJ-1, Dan was sweating chocolate bullets. "Come on," he said to himself. "You da man. You gotta be, for them!"

What had once been Lady X's fabulous penthouse began to slide apart in huge sections. All Dex and Sunshine could do was hold on and hope. "You can do it, pal," Dex said as he watched the plane climb straight up. "Just believe it; believe in yourself! Come on! That's it, Dan! The loop-the-loop!"

Sunshine clutched Dex's hand. "He'll get it this time. I know he will!" she cheered in her sweet voice.

Dan's plane turned upside down! "DARE THE DAY!" he yelled as the plane went over backward and completed the loop. He whizzed past Dex, who grabbed the rope ladder just as the cardboard penthouse fell apart completely!

"*Dare the day and fly away!*" Dex, Dan, and Sunshine shouted as the XJ-1 zoomed off.

Dan pulled Dex and Sunshine into the cockpit. "The sun is shinin' again!" he said, seeing Sunshine's happy face.

She threw her arms around the squirrel's neck. "I just knew you'd do it, Dan!"

"Me too, pal," Dex said, patting him on the back. "Me too."

Dan smiled as he banked the XJ-1 into a wide turn. They headed down the main aisle. Cheering Ikes waved at the plane. "Dex," Dan said, "you stopped Brand X."

But Dex wasn't ready to celebrate yet. "Not until Lady X is discontinued," he answered.

"Dex," Sunshine said, looking down. "Something's wrong!" The lightning suddenly stopped! "What's happening?"

Dex gasped. "Somebody cut the power by the loading dock door!"

Below them, Ikes were screaming in terror! "A human has seen us! Scatter! Run!"

Stomping through the aisles like a giant, the Brand X sales rep, Mr. Clipboard, entered the store.

"What the jalapeño's he doin' here?" Dan asked Dex.

"You can bet it's not for our victory parade," Dex answered as they landed the plane and ducked out of sight.

"I understand somebody ordered a recall!" Mr. Clipboard called out. He glowered, surveying the store with his furious gaze. Little Ikes scattered in fear as the man in black boots began to stomp through the store on a rampage. Like Godzilla destroying a city, Mr. Clipboard tore down the foil lightning rods from the buildings and stomped them into the floor.

Dex was furious. "Dan, go find Lady X. I've got a bone to pick with this guy."

"No, Dex!" Sunshine cried. "You can't! Not a human. You'll be crushed!"

Dex took her hand and kissed it. He looked into her eyes. "Whatever happens, Sunshine, we'll always have Produce." Sunshine smiled wistfully at her great Dogtective.

Dex took off down the cereal aisle, running against the flow of retreating Ikes. In the chaos, he spotted Maximilius Moose and Lola.

"Maximilius, Lola!" Dex cried out. "Let's bring him down!"

"You gots it, boss!" Maximilius called, and the two raced off with Dex.

Mr. Clipboard was stomping down the cereal aisle, crushing box after box. Dex suddenly jumped into the aisle and looked up at him. "Hey, pencil neck! It's checkout time."

"You pompous pipsqueak," Mr. Clipboard snapped back. "I'll stomp you into oblivion."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Dex said, and took off down the aisle with Mr. Clipboard at his heels.

Dex ducked under the dental floss Maximilius and Lola had stretched across the aisle. Mr. Clipboard, however, didn't see it. He tripped and fell, crashing headfirst onto the floor.

Dex leaped aside as Mr. Clipboard's neck broke open. Sparks flew out in all directions. Mr. Clipboard thrashed in the aisle for a moment and then was still, wiring hanging from the cracks in his body.

"A robot!" Dex said as bursts of steam rose from Mr. Clipboard's ears.

An escape hatch in the back of the huge robot's head hissed open. Out stepped Lady X in a skintight red catsuit. "*Ex*-traordinary, aren't I?" she said, looking at Dex.

Dex was stunned. She'd been at the controls the whole time. "How can this be happening?"

Lady X smiled and held a picture next to her face. "Don't you recognize me, Dogtective? Sunshine's old neighbor?"

Dex looked at the hideous picture. "Priscilla? From Priscilla Pussly's Genetically Gigantic Prunes? But you were recalled. And butt ugly!"

"Quick trip to Brazil for a little plastic surgery," Lady X said, patting under her chin, "then back for my revenge."

"So you built yourself a human robot and recalled Sunshine. Then you stole her essence to make your Elixir for Brand X," Dex said, rubbing his own chin.

Dan's XJ-1 came in for a landing, and a crowd began to gather behind Dex. All eyes were on Lady X.

"All anyone ever wanted was that sweet Sunshine Goodness," she shouted angrily. "Two months I sat on the shelf next to Little Miss Perfect. No one bought my beautiful genetically gigantic prunes."

Dex frowned. "But how did you get in and out of the store? You're an Ike."

"Humans!" she said, laughing. "When you look like this, you can get them to do anything."

Dex nodded. So did Dan. "Clever plan," Dex noted. "But Brand X is being recalled."

"You'll never get me," Lady X said with villainous glee. "I still have my Elixir. I'll be back! But enough about me; let's do something about you!"

She jumped, did a triple flip, and kicked Dex around the aisle with amazing skill and speed.

"Yo, dog," Dan called to Dex. "Sugar smack her!"

"Boss'll never hit a dame," Maximilius Moose said, watching Lady X mop the floor with Dex.

Dex was down on one knee. Lady X lifted her arm high, and a razor-sharp set of cat claws suddenly extended from her gloved hand. She was

finally going to do Dex in! She was laughing maniacally when a fist smacked her jaw.

The crowd gasped. It was Sunshine Goodness! "But I will!" the raisin girl said, delivering a roundhouse kick to Lady X.

"The bimbo's mine," she said, following the kick with a series of martial arts blows to the head and body. Lady X's plastic surgery seemed to be coming loose with each punch and kick. Her face sagged into a hideous wrinkled prune.

Dan was shocked. "Sunshine slapped her back to ugly!" he said as the crowd cheered.

"It doesn't have to end like this," Lady X pleaded, looking up at Dex. "All I ever really wanted was you."

Dex looked at the woman who had caused so much misery. "Frankly, my dear," he said flatly, "I don't give a SPAM."

Lady X dropped her ugly face into her hands. "Dan," Dex said with a nod, "wrap her up and take her to the Expiration Station for recall with the rest of Brand X."

As Dan moved Lady X to the Expiration Station, Hairy Hold moved sheepishly closer to Dex. "I heard there was a Resistance," he said to the Dogtective. "Call me fashionably late."

Dex gave him a small grin. "You may be mostly fluff, Hairy, but the rest of you is pretty strong stuff. Nice work, everybody! But we've still got a lot to do! Only four hours until our store opens!"

Dr. Nustrix rushed up to Dex. "My de-servative antidote!" he said, proudly holding up an atomizer bottle of liquid. "It should work on every Ike. Let's give it a whiff."

His first patient was Polar Penguin. He spritzed a cloud of the antidote over the penguin's frozen body. Dex held his breath and hoped. The little penguin began to stir. Then he opened his eyes.

"I knew you'd thave me, friend!" he said to Dex, fully coming to after his long sleep.

"Oh, Dex, you should be so proud. You saved us all!" Sunshine said, jumping into Dex's arms. She threw a raisin into the air. Dex coolly caught the raisin in his mouth and gave her a grin.

"We saved each other," he said with a wink. He patted his heart. "Because the secret is inside—inside all of us!"

Dan put his hands on his hips and looked at the cheering Ikes. "All right!" he said happily. "Things really turned out perfect. The good ol' days are back!"

Dex nodded. "With one change, I hope." He turned to his beautiful rosy raisin girl. "Sunshine, will you marry me?"

Sunshine fluttered her lovely long lashes. "Yes, Dex," she sighed.

The whole store cheered as the two kissed. Dan was a little choked up until he saw Sweet Cakes look at him with a sparkle in her eyes. He brightened. "Somebody's gettin' dessert tonight!" he exclaimed.

***

The next morning, old Mr. Leonard entered the market. He looked around at the burnt and destroyed boxes of Brand X products on the floor, and his jaw dropped. Then he looked at the shelves. All the colorful boxes and cans with the old, familiar brand labels were lined up perfectly. "I must be dreaming," he said, scratching his head.

One month later, Mr. Leonard was happily helping a shopper load her groceries into a cart. Kaptain Krispy chips, Polar Pleasure ice cream, and Twinkleton toothpaste topped the brown paper bag.

Outside, a large delivery truck rolled up to the supermarket. "I've been expecting you," Mr. Leonard said cheerfully to the deliverymen.

He opened a crate excitedly and pulled out a brand-new box of cereal. Mr. Leonard liked the looks of the colorful new box, and he read the cereal's name with a smile.

"'New and Improved Cinnamon Sleuth Cereal . . . Now with Sunshine Goodness Raisins.' Looks like a bestseller to me!"

When the lights go out in the supermarket, the aisles come alive as Marketropolis, an exciting city filled with living brand icons called Ikes. Then one night things start going bad. Sunshine Goodness, the raisin Ike, mysteriously disappears, and a mysterious new Ike named Lady X begins making some unwelcome changes to the store's inventory. As Ike after Ike gets recalled, super sleuth Dex Dogtective and his pal Daredevil Dan discover that Lady X's plans are far more sinister than they ever could have imagined. Only one thing is for certain. There's about to be a food fight, and if the Ikes don't win it, they're going to get cleaned off the shelves . . . *permanently*.

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